

Going to Rome is also a pilgrimage: what is the meaning of 'Rome' in the history of the Church?
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Dear friends of FIAT,

You have well done to organize these days of meetings as a pilgrimage to ROME, yes I say to Rome.

With the group you want to position yourself explicitly within the Catholic Church. Well, Rome is the heart and center of the universal Church. By coming to Rome from different countries, you want to clearly express your link with the universal Church of which Pope Francis, as bishop of Rome, is the head and the visible sign of union, the one who guarantees the unity between the local Catholic churches of the whole world. Not a head like an absolute monarch, but a *primus inter pares*. A guarantor of unity, yes, but not unity as uniformity, but unity in diversity!

This is the important role of Rome, a role that the bishops of Rome - the popes - must fulfill as successors of Peter: to watch over the unity of the local Churches, while respecting the individuality of each one. And this with Jesus Christ and his Gospel as their only compass, and with the Holy Spirit as their only guide, in the midst of the real and changing world of all times, but without depending on any worldly or political power.

This is what Peter's successors in the course of history have tried to do, I say tried to do, sometimes with more or less success. Like Peter himself, his successors have also had moments of denial of the Lord and of infidelity to his message. But just as Peter, after each infidelity, committed himself to Jesus with greater love and fidelity. In the course of more than 2000 years of Church history, the popes of Rome have ensured that the Church remains founded to this day on Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, and on his unique Gospel message, and I repeat: by trial and error - despite all the human failings of the popes and the staff. For "Rome" to be a beacon that guides local churches and Christians throughout the world.

This is possible when the bishops of Rome, as successors of Peter, consider their mission as a service! The only task that Peter, the first among his peers, received from Jesus was: "Feed my sheep", and this three times (John 21, 15-17). To be a shepherd of a flock is not a matter of power and violence (that is what mercenaries do), no, it is a very helpful task, with a delicate attention to slow down those who run ahead too fast, to keep on the right path those who are lagging behind, to go and find those who are lost, to walk in the midst of the flock with great sensitivity towards each member and to direct them with gentle nudges towards green and fertile pastures. Yes, to be a shepherd is to be of service! Pope Francis understands this well. On March 19, he issued a new Constitution (entitled "*Praedicate Evangelium*") on the organization of the Curia Romana, his collaborators in the central administration of the Church. The central idea is that the Pope and the Curia are at the service of the universal Church, no longer the controlling police but the servants.

It would take a whole course in Church history to illustrate this service function of Rome. That is not our intention, we do not have the time.

I would simply like to recall some of the areas in which the Church and the bishops of Rome, as successors of Peter, have endeavored throughout history to fulfill their ministry of gathering and guiding the whole flock of Jesus.

I see schematically four areas in which Rome, the Popes and the Curia, have tried - and I repeat, tried by trial and error - to fulfill this ministry of shepherding the universal flock of Jesus' disciples.

1. Ensuring the independence, autonomy and cooperation of the Church

2. Concern for the truth of the Christian faith (the "*verum*")
3. Care for the beauty of the Christian faith (the "*pulchrum*")
4. Taking care of the goodness (the "*bonum*"), that is, the implementation of the message of Jesus in the life lived.

I. Let us begin with the first point: the concern for independence, autonomy from the powers of the world, and good cooperation (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 76).

It remains remarkable that Peter quickly made the decision to come to Rome. He understood very well that if one wanted to spread the faith of Jesus, one should not go to the mountain villages, but to the city, where many people lived, and first of all to the metropolis of the empire of Rome. It was here that he became the leader - *episcopos* - of the first Christian community, the first bishop of Rome. It was here, in Nero's circus, next to the present-day St. Peter's Basilica, that Peter died a martyr. Very soon the first Christians and, soon after, those from outside Rome came to venerate his tomb, but in secret because the new Christian religion was forbidden by the Roman emperors, who allowed themselves to be worshipped as gods and therefore could not tolerate that only one God - the God of the Christians - was the only true God. It led to the persecution of Christians for three centuries. The freedom of Christians was severely restricted. Public worship was impossible.

It was the time of the martyrs, who preferred to give their lives for Christ, rather than be restricted in their freedom of confession. The blood of the martyrs has truly become the seed of new Christians.

If you have come on pilgrimage to Rome these days, it is first to venerate - in the wake of millions of faithful - the tomb of Peter, and then to meet Peter's successor, the Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis, on Saturday morning.

The situation of persecution just described changed with Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century. In 313, after his victory over his imperial rival through the intercession of the God of the Christians, he promised and granted freedom of worship to the Christians, and soon after, under his successor, Theodosius, Christianity became the official religion of the state. The emperors themselves became the promoters of the construction of great Christian churches, first of all St. Peter's, over the tomb of the apostle Peter.

Freedom of religion brought relief to Christians. No more persecutions. Recognition by the state and even more: protection from the state. A good thing at first sight, but a danger at second sight: the Church became subordinate to the state, to the emperor, and later to the princes of the various nations.

At some point in the eighth century (756), Charlemagne's father, Pippin the Short, gave the pope a whole area around Rome, all of central Italy, as territory, thus making him also head of state of a considerable empire, the so-called Papal States. As a result, attention is quickly divided between his duty as shepherd of the universal flock of Christians and his occupations as head of state. An ambiguity that would last until 1870, when the pope lost his Papal State during the Italian unification.

The protection of the Roman emperor Constantine and his successors, and then of the heirs to the Roman Empire, which collapsed in 476, the emperors of the Holy Roman Empire, undeniably offered great freedom of movement to the Christian religion and to the Pope of Rome. But very soon Christianity and its leader, the Pope of Rome, became an instrument for the power politics of the new (German) emperors, and papal powers (especially the appointment of new bishops) were monopolized by the emperor. There was a danger that the Church would become a plaything in the hands of the state. The culmination of the conflict of powers was the so-called battle of the investitures (11th century). A bitter struggle that reached its peak under Pope Gregory VII (late 11th century) and Emperor Henry IV of the Germanic Roman Empire. The Concordat of Worms of 1122 signified a victory

for the freedom of the Church and the Pope of Rome: the freedom to appoint bishops belonged exclusively to the Pope.

Subsequently, the national princes repeatedly tried to make the Catholic Church in their country an instrument of their politics, to submit it to secular authority, and to make the Church a State Church, separated from the supreme authority of Rome. Some examples:

- King Henry VIII of England who, in vain, tried to place the Catholic Church of England and its teachings under his final authority. This eventually separated into a national church, the Anglican Church.
- Think of the tragedy of the wars of religion between Protestants and Catholics in the German Empire and elsewhere, based on the principle of "*cuius regio illius et religio*" (to whom the empire belongs, it is his right to impose his religion).
- Think of Gallicanism in France, where the French kings (Louis XIV and his successors) wanted to assert themselves as the supreme authority also in matters of church, which in other words wanted to make the French church a national church.
- Think of Emperor Joseph II of Austria, to whom our regions (today's Belgium) also belonged. He wanted to interfere in the affairs of the Church down to the smallest detail, which earned him the nickname of "Emperor Sacristan".
- Think of Napoleon, who had his own catechism written, in which obedience to the emperor was a primary article of faith; Napoleon who had Pope Pius VII imprisoned at Fontainebleau because of his protests.

The turning point came in 1870, when Pope Pius IX lost his own papal state (central Italy) to the Italian unification movement of Garibaldi and Cavour.

This was a difficult pill for the pope to swallow, based on a justified fear that with the loss of his political power, he might also lose his freedom of authority as head of the universal Church.

It was not until 1929, with the Lateran Treaty, that the Italian state reached an agreement with Pius XI, then in office, granting the pope a mini-state of 44 hectares - the current 'State of the Vatican City' - over which he became the sovereign head of state, guaranteeing the pope the ability to exercise his spiritual leadership of the universal Church independently of any political authority.

The more or less 100 years that have passed since then have shown that the loss of the Pope's temporal power has only benefited his moral and spiritual authority and his pastoral role in the universal Church.

I think this has become more evident than ever under Pope Francis, who is unquestionably not only the leader of the worldwide Catholic Church, but also the moral and spiritual leader of the world today!

II. A second aspect of the service task of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope and the Curia, is his concern for the truth (the "verum"), for the preservation of the authentic message of Jesus. His message as transmitted by the apostles and reflected in the biblical writings (especially the New Testament).

- This began very early on, when the apostles were still alive. The big question then was whether Gentiles (non-Jews) could also be admitted into the Christian community and be baptized without having received circumcision. It was with this question that Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, went to Jerusalem to present it to the apostles and elders of this first Christian community: it was in fact the first council in history (see Acts 15). And it is Peter who pleads that the Gentiles - uncircumcised - who convert to God and to Jesus, should not be burdened with unnecessary burdens (i.e. circumcision). The Jerusalem community - through its local leader James - agrees to this. This is a crucial decision that gives a definitive turn to the universal spread of the young Christianity.

Note: from the beginning, it is not Peter alone who decides - the leader of the flock appointed by Christ - but Peter in union and consultation with the leaders of the Jerusalem community; from the beginning, decisions on important questions such as the content of the faith are submitted to the judgment of the wider community of faith (a council) led by Peter, the *primus inter pares*, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

- Throughout history, we see the same thing happening: the great questions of faith are decided by Peter's successor, the pope as bishop of Rome, but ultimately in consultation with the wider assembly of the church, composed of the other bishops and theologians.

The great question of struggle in the early centuries of Christianity was the true nature of the person of Jesus Christ: is he both truly God and truly man? Arius, a priest of Alexandria in the early fourth century, claimed that Jesus was created, and therefore human, and that he was not really God. And conversely, Nestorius (early 5th century) claimed that Christ was only God and not truly man. These heresies were widespread.

Several councils (i.e. ecclesiastical assemblies of all the bishops) were necessary to establish definitively the true doctrine of the faith concerning Christ (and the Holy Trinity): the councils of Nicea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451): Christ is one person with two natures, divine and human, in other words, Christ is truly God and truly man in one person.

If, at first, the Byzantine emperors of Constantinople [and the influential bishops of the great Christian centers of the East - Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem - such as Basil (Caesarea), Athanasius (Alexandria) and Cyril (Alexandria)] played an important role in these councils, the voice of the bishops gradually became more prominent. Basil (Caesarea), Athanasius (Alexandria) and Cyril (Alexandria) played an important role in these councils to preserve the purity of doctrine. But gradually the voice of the Bishop of Rome, who as the successor of Peter was generally considered *primus inter pares*, became more and more decisive at these councils [called ecumenical councils because they brought together all the bishops (or their representatives) and influential theologians]. Thus, it was Pope Leo I who, at the Council of Chalcedon (451), succeeded in having his formulation of the Creed accepted by all the council fathers: this is the text of the Creed that we still say every Sunday at Mass.

The patient search for a consensus on the content of the faith - the *verum* - has not always been so respectful - not even on the part of the pope, who - since the eighth century, as we have already mentioned - has begun to involve himself more and more in his secular power as prince of the Papal States.

It is worth mentioning here two extremely painful events, which led to an ever existing split in the Church of Christ.

- (1) In the eleventh century, there was the conflict between the Patriarch of Constantinople, Michael Caerularius, supported by the principal patriarchs of the East, and the Bishop of Rome, Pope Leo IX. It was about the insertion in the Creed of Nicea-Constantinople of the term "Filioque" in the text of the profession of faith of the Holy Spirit. The text of 451 specifies that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. In the West, they had added: the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son (Filioque in Latin), without consulting all the bishops gathered in council on such an important article of faith.

It must be said: the East and the West had become very distant and alienated from each other.

The pope sent a legate to Constantinople to settle the matter on his behalf. The legate behaved in a very awkward and rigid manner, very authoritarian, without any sense of nuance and consultation. The Patriarch of Constantinople felt so offended that he completely ignored the papal legate and proclaimed himself "universal bishop". The papal legate responded by issuing the bull of excommunication of the patriarch and the Church of Constantinople and the sympathetic Eastern

patriarchs. This happened in 1054 and sealed the great Eastern schism between the Latin Church of Rome and the Church of Constantinople or Byzantium, which considered itself the true legitimate Church (Greek: Orthodox). The result is the split, until now, between the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church.

Under the last popes, starting with John XXIII and especially Paul VI

who met and embraced the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople Athenagoras in 1964 in Jerusalem, and under the impulse of the document of the Second Vatican Council on the unity of Christians (*Unitatis redintegratio*) and of the Dicastery "for the promotion of Christian unity" then founded, much progress has been made in bringing the two together. The mutual excommunication was lifted. In particular with the Patriarch of Constantinople, there are many exchanges and a firm will to fulfill the prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper ("that all may be one"). Pope Francis wants to do everything in his power to make this unity a reality.

- (2) A second painful rupture occurred five centuries later, at the beginning of the 16th century, with Martin Luther as the main protagonist. Martin Luther was a pious Augustinian monk from Erfurt, Germany, who took the religious life very seriously, almost scrupulously, and who, as a professor of biblical theology, immersed himself in the study of the Holy Scriptures. Among other things, he commented on the book of Psalms and St. Paul's letters to the Romans and the Galatians. We are in the era of humanism, with among others, Erasmus and Thomas More, who tried to renew the ossified medieval theology and to denounce the widespread abuses in the Church: Ecclesiastical privileges were commonplace; the clergy sought to obtain as many ecclesiastical benefits (= paid ecclesiastical functions) as possible for material gain, leaving pastoral work to the inferior, poorly paid clerics. At the seat of the bishop of Rome sat the so-called Renaissance popes, who were more concerned with promoting the new artistic and cultural movement: the Renaissance.

They acted as great patrons who financed the most talented writers and artists to give shape to the new Renaissance style in great building projects, painting and sculpture, literature, with Rome and the papal court as the center. Some Renaissance popes had an entire court, with a predominance of art, wealth and money to pay for it all, and with an often dubious moral life; with nepotism and with a preoccupation more political than religious-spiritual. Among the champions were Popes Alexander VI, Julius II and Leo X. Many were upset by this state of affairs. Protest movements sprang up everywhere: a return to evangelical authenticity became the cry.

In this context, the pious monk Martin Luther was particularly irritated by the preaching of indulgences organized in Germany in 1516-1517 at the behest of Pope Leo X: Luther was not primarily irritated by the indulgences themselves, but by the fact that obtaining an indulgence was linked to the payment of a sum of money for the construction of the new St. Peter's Basilica in the new Renaissance style (the basilica as we know it today).

Luther recorded his objections to this and other abuses of the church in 95 theses, which he posted for discussion in 1517 at the castle church in Wittenberg, where he taught at the university.

Luther invoked the letters of St. Paul to emphasize that man is not saved by doing as many good works as possible, such as giving money to obtain indulgences and thus giving the impression that man can earn his own salvation/redemption, that he can buy his justification from God. No, says Luther, St. Paul teaches us that our salvation is pure grace, a pure gift of God, unmerited. Only through faith and the reading of the Holy Scriptures does man obtain - in a totally undeserved way - this grace. The sacraments and good works have become secondary.

Luther's vision seduced many people. An entire reformist way of thinking and acting spread rapidly in Germany and abroad.

Pope Leo X was more concerned with other things, the construction of St. Peter's Basilica and the beautification of the apostolic palace.

In 1520, he finally took action. In fact, it was already too late. His only way of calling Luther to order was to threaten him with anathema, excommunication from the Church. Luther, who was very emotional and had little capacity for relativization, pushed by the supporters of his ideas, refused to retract one of his theses and reproached the pope for behaving like an antichrist. The result was inevitable: on January 3, 1521, Pope Leo X effectively excommunicated Luther and his followers. Thus, a new and deep schism in the Church of Christ became a bitter reality: this was the birth of the Protestant Reformation, later led even more radically by Calvin.

Pope Leo X died on December 1, 1521 and on January 9, 1522, after a difficult conclave, Adrian VI, born in the Netherlands, tutor of Emperor Charles V, former professor of theology at the University of Louvain, who accompanied Charles V to Spain as his most important adviser, both bishop of Tortosa and cardinal (at the instigation of Charles V) succeeded him. He became the last non-Italian pope before Pope John Paul II.

At the beginning of his pontificate, after his enthronement on August 31, 1522, on September 1 he presented, to the consternation of the assembled cardinals, a drastic reform program for the Church: no more patronage for the arts, no more worldly court life of the curia, an austere lifestyle, a return to the essence of the Gospel and pastoral zeal of the pope and the Church. The Dutch bursar faced the greatest opposition from the cardinals and the curia. He saw the great gravity of the Protestant schism, which quickly divided Europe into two camps. His goal was to thoroughly reform the Church in its head and its members. However, after a good year, on September 14, 1523, Adrian VI died prematurely: far too early to realize his program of reform within the Catholic Church.

Yet his program continued to resonate with his successors, who became increasingly aware that this thorough reform of the head and members of the Church was absolutely necessary, as the only valid response to the Reformation. The popes understood that this had to be the work of a general assembly of the Church, an ecumenical council of all the bishops and great theologians, presided over by the pope or his representatives. Finally, it was Pope Paul III who opened the council in 1545 in the city of Trent, in northern Italy. It would last in three sessions until 1563. First, questions of faith were dealt with in reaction to Protestantism: no salvation of man "by faith alone" and without good works, with Sacred Scripture as the only source of faith - as the Protestants taught - but the emphasis on the fact that in addition to faith, good works (man's concrete efforts to express his faith) are also important, and that in addition to Sacred Scripture, the tradition of faith and the Magisterium of the Church can be a source of faith. In addition to matters of faith, the Council of Trent also took indispensable steps to reform the life of the Church. Two examples only. Trent decreed that henceforth a bishop could have only one diocese, where he must actually reside, and which he must visit each year to intensify contact with his priests and faithful. Each bishop was required to establish a seminary for the proper theological formation of priests.

The Council of Trent would bear fruit in the following centuries: the so-called Counter-Reformation or better said the Catholic Reformation. The pope was helped by strong bishops like Carolus Borromeus (bishop of Milan) and by new religious foundations such as the Oratorians, founded by Philip Neri, and above all the Jesuits, an order founded by Ignatius of Loyola and approved by Pope Paul III in 1540. By a special promise of obedience to the pope, they became, as it were, the pope's shock troops in the realization of the great ideal of the Catholic reform.

In the defense of the "verum", the true doctrine of the faith, we have cited two examples where the bishops of Rome reacted too slowly or with little consideration and consultation: the Eastern schism with the Orthodox in the 11th century, and the schism with the Protestant reformers in the 16th century.

There are also good examples in the history of the Church where popes have played a true leadership and inspirational role.

I am thinking in particular of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The old Pope John XXIII surprised the whole world when, totally unexpectedly, he announced on January 25, 1959 that he was going to convene an ecumenical council. A council in which there would be no condemnation in the first place (e.g. of the practical atheism that had become widespread), but in which the council leaders would try to read and interpret the signs of the times and give positive answers on the doctrinal and, above all, pastoral level. John XXIII opened the Council in 1962 in St. Peter's Basilica and his successor, Paul VI, would guide and direct the course of the Council in a very open way with, among others, our Cardinal Suenens as one of the three influential moderators. Afterwards, Paul VI also had the task of implementing the important decisions of the Council (among others, on the liturgy, on the Church and the pastoral approach of the Church, on ecumenism). To this end, he thoroughly reformed the Roman Curia, creating new dicasteries to help him in this task, and in the same perspective he established the triennial Synod of Bishops to discuss important questions of faith and the Church, in collegial consultation with bishops from all over the world. His successors, John Paul I, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and now Francis, have continued this work undeterred. Pope Francis clearly wants to give even more strength to the fundamental intuition of Vatican II: a Church properly at the service of the world. To achieve this, guided by the Holy Spirit, he wants to set out together (synodically) with the bishops, priests and all the baptized, to make the Church an even more credible sign for the world: a Church that evangelizes, that serves, that is sober, that spreads the beauty and joy of the Christian faith, in solidarity with Christians of other Churches, with non-Christian believers and with all people of good will, in order to build together a better and more fraternal world.

This is why Pope Francis, in his new constitution on the reform of the Roman Curia "*Praedicate Evangelium*", published on March 19, puts the emphasis on the proclamation of the Gospel. From now on, the dicastery for the proclamation of the faith will occupy the first place in the curia, and only in second place comes the dicastery for the doctrine of the faith, until now the first among the dicasteries. First, the Gospel must be proclaimed in all its power and freshness. Then comes the concern for the correct formulation of the truths of the faith. And all the dicasteries, Pope Francis emphasizes in the new Constitution, are at the service of the bishops and the universal Church worldwide. They are not the police who control and censor the bishops and local churches, but their willing helpers and companions!

We have little time to deal with the last two aspects: as the third, the concern of the Popes for beauty (the "*pulchrum*") and as the fourth, the concern for the good (the "*bonum*").

III The concern of the popes for the "*pulchrum*"

-As soon as Christianity was officially admitted into the Roman Empire, the bishops of Rome and their assistants did everything in their power to furnish the meeting house of the Christians, the church buildings, with dignity. At first sober, but always dignified and uplifting to the soul, inspiring prayer to Christ, the King whose kingdom is not of this world. Church buildings were to be "royal" dwelling places for Christ and his heavenly Father. King in Greek is "basileus": the church buildings of the first centuries are therefore called "basilica, basilica", residence of the King, Christ the King!

It is especially in the apse, the choir of the basilicas, that the royal dignity of Christ was generally represented by mosaics or frescoes: Christ, not as a man, certainly not as a suffering man, but as an exalted pantocrator, judge of the end of time, blessing and sitting on his throne. We know this from the beautiful mosaics in many ancient basilicas in Rome (e.g. Maria Maggiore, St. Paul Outside the Walls, Santa Maria in Trastevere, San Clemente and many others) and elsewhere, for example in Ravenna. It is a heavenly vision, with much gold in the background and figures - Christ and Mary above all - of superhuman, hieratic form. Indeed, a foretaste of heaven.

-In the Middle Ages - especially in Western and Northern Europe - we experienced the splendor of the Gothic cathedrals with their pointed arches and tall towers: vertical lines that, in turn, directed the attention of the faithful upwards, like signposts to God and heaven.

-And then we have the Renaissance of which the popes of Rome were the great promoters. If, in the previous point (the concern for "verum", the content of the faith), we had to present the popes of the Renaissance in a less positive light, here - in the concern for "*pulchrum*", for beauty as a way to God and as an expression of the beauty of the Christian faith - we have to honor them as promoters of so much artistic beauty as an expression of the beauty of the Christian faith and as a visualization of the biblical message. Think of Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, Rafael's frescoes in the papal chambers of Julius II and Leo X, etc.

-During the Catholic Reformation after the Council of Trent, it were the Baroque artists who, inspired by the Renaissance, sumptuously decorated the churches with their paintings and sculptures in order to underline the renewal of the Catholic faith after the crisis of the Reformation: a splendid expression of the Catholic Church's renewed confidence in the power of its message.

We can think of our own great baroque masters such as Rubens, Jordaens, Van Dyck; of the masterpieces of architecture, sculpture and painting of the baroque geniuses in Rome such as Bernini, Borromini, Caravaggio, etc.; of the imposing baroque churches of the Jesuits, il Gesù and Sant' Ignazio in Rome, or St. Louis of the French, or Sant' Antonio dei Portogesi and so many others.

-And heaven comes down to earth in the somewhat playful art of the rococo, where angels (the "putti") and saints crowd the stuccos, frescoes and statues of sophisticated rococo artists. One thinks of course of the splendid rococo interiors of monastery churches and places of pilgrimage in Bavaria, Austria and Switzerland: Ottobeuren, Vierzehnheiligen, the Wieskirche, Melk, Einsiedeln, Sankt Gallen, to name a few.

-But also in other art forms, such as literature and music, popes have often been promoters of beauty. Particular mention should be made of Pope Gregory the Great (late 6th century), who established guidelines for the music of the Roman liturgy, which received his name as Gregorian chant, and which is still practiced today, in abbeys and parishes, especially for festive liturgies. And in the 17th and 18th centuries there is the rise of the great polyphony, strongly promoted by the popes (with e.g. Palestrina), which enhances the brilliance of the great pontifical liturgies.

What is less known is that one of the last popes, Paul VI, was a great promoter of art, especially modern religious art in all its forms, as an expression of contemporary man's search for God. And Pope Benedict XVI, in countless sermons and speeches, has spoken of the great importance of "beauty" in all its expressions as an important place of search for God.

IV The Popes' promotion of the good, their concern for the "*bonum*"

- If, in the first centuries of the Church's history, great attention was paid to the correct formulation of the content of the faith (the "verum": see our second point), this should not make us forget that, from the beginning, the bishops of Rome (and other bishops as well) paid great attention to the work of service, to the concrete putting into practice of the gospel message, in particular to the service of the poor, the sick and the oppressed. For this purpose the Bishop of Rome divided the great metropolis of Rome into seven districts, called diaconates, headed by a deacon. These seven deacons were the first and closest collaborators of the pope: the *diaconi cardinales* (senior deacons), in fact the first cardinals to assist the pope in the organized care of the many poor in densely populated Rome. They were to be extremely reliable, incorruptible people in handling the large sums of money that were collected for the poor among the Christians. The deacon Laurentius is a wonderful example.

- Over time, many popes have promoted and supported initiatives to serve the poor and the sick. They have recognized many religious orders and foundations that put into practice the works of mercy: the

hospitable nuns, often Cistercian; the friars who visited prisoners and buried victims of the plague; orders for the liberation of Christian slaves in Muslim sultanates (e.g., the Trinitarians); and orders for the protection of the poor; the sisters (Daughters of Charity) and priests (Lazarists) of St. Vincent de Paul (17th century) for the care of poor children and widows, the home care of diseases and the education of orphans.

- And much closer to us: we remember well the great support of Pope John Paul II to the "Missionaries of Charity", the sisters founded by Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who went to seek out the poor and the dying in the streets of the big cities in India to be near them with love in their last moments of life.

- But also religious who explicitly expressed poverty in their own way of life were recognized and encouraged by the popes. We think in particular of the followers of St. Francis and St. Dominic, the so-called mendicant orders (late 12th - early 13th century).

- At the end of the 19th century, the century of the industrial revolution, and of the enormous social question of the working proletariat, Pope Leo XIII, with his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), was to lay the foundations of a whole social teaching of the Church, defending the rights and dignity of workers. The encyclical became the charter for social action groups in parishes around the world. Putting the Gospel into practice: not only in doctrine but also in daily action.

- And if we want to characterize the pontificate of the current Pope Francis, I think we can say that he, even more explicitly than his direct predecessors John Paul II and Benedict XVI, whose first attention and concern was the doctrine of faith, the "verum" of the Christian message, that Pope Francis, especially in his encyclicals *Laudato si* and *Fratelli tutti*, places the primary emphasis on the evangelical and coherent witness of Christians in the world, on the experience of *caritas* and fraternity, especially for people in situations of poverty and distress. Thus, in the new organization chart of the Curia, the Pope has introduced a new dicastery, that of *caritas*, of charity, under the direction of the Pontifical Chaplain, Cardinal Krajewski, a dicastery that is immediately placed at the top of the organs of the Pontifical Curia.

Conclusion

We can conclude that throughout the 20 centuries of Church history, the bishops of Rome have endeavored to take to heart, with care and dedication, their duty as successors of Peter to "feed the flock of Jesus" in changing times.

Four areas are addressed in this task: concern for the freedom and autonomy of the Church from the powers of the world, concern for the purity of the doctrine of the faith (the *verum*), concern for reaching God through beauty (the *pulchrum*), and concern that the good (the *bonum*) of the Gospel message become visible in the actions of Christians. Some popes have profiled themselves more in one or another of the four areas of concern. Some have lingered too long and have sometimes, like Peter, denied the Lord and his Church, but if we put together the solicitude of all the popes - some more in this area, others more in that one - I think we can say that the Spirit of the Risen Christ, through the bishops of Rome, with their human imperfections, has steered the ship of the Church and kept it on course even in troubled waters, sometimes with some damage; and that the Church of Rome was and is a beacon of guidance for Christians throughout the world.

That is why it is salutary for Christians to come to Rome from time to time to express their union and solidarity with Mother Church, with Peter and his successors, especially with his current successor, Pope Francis. And to renew our faith in the Triune God and to fervently pray to the Holy Spirit that with his wisdom and power he may continue to guide and direct the Church in the footsteps of Jesus and his Gospel, invoking Mary, mother of all followers of Jesus, mother of the Church.

Yes, dear friends of Friendship, that is why it is "vere dignum et iustum" that you have come to Rome for these days of reflection, of prayer to the Holy Spirit, and of fraternal communion.

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