

Vatican City, 16 August 2019

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To His Excellency the Most Reverend
Msgr. Francesco LAMBIASI
Bishop of Rimini

Your Reverend Excellency,

On the occasion of the 40th Meeting for Friendship Amongst Peoples, I am happy to communicate to you, to the organizers, the volunteers and to all the participants the greetings and best wishes of the Supreme Pontiff.

The theme chosen for this year is taken from a poem by Saint John Paul II about Veronica, who makes her way through the crowd to dry Jesus' face as He walks His way of the cross: "Your name was born from what you gazed upon" (K. Woytyła, "III. *Il Nome [The Name]*" in Id. *Tutte le opera letterarie [His Literary Works]*, Milan 2001, 155). Servant of God Fr Luigi Giussani commented on this line of the poem saying, "Let us imagine the crowd, Christ passing with the cross, and her, fixing her eyes on Christ, and a path opens up in the crowd as she looks at Him. Everyone watches her. She was faceless; she was a woman like any other. She gained a name, a face and a personality in history, for which we remember her even now, because of that upon which she fixed her eyes. [...] To love is to affirm the other" (*La convenienza umana della fede [The Human Advantageousness of Faith]*, Milan 2018, 159-160).

"He was seen and therefore saw; [...] unless he had been seen, he would not have been able to see" (Saint Augustine, *Sermon 174*, 4.4), Saint Augustine said of Zacchaeus. This is the truth the Church has been proclaiming to humanity for over two thousand years. Christ loved us; He gave His life for us, for each of us, to affirm our unique and unrepeatable face. Why is it so important that this proclamation be renewed today? Because many of our contemporaries are falling under the blows of life's trials, and find themselves abandoned and alone. Often, they are treated like mere statistics. We think of the thousands of individuals who flee every day from war or poverty: more than numbers, they are faces, people, names and stories. We can never forget this, especially when the throwaway culture marginalizes, discriminates and exploits, threatening the dignity of the person.

How many forgotten souls urgently need to see the face of the Lord to be able to find themselves! Today's men and woman often live in uncertainty, fumbling along alienated from themselves; it seems they have lost all solidity, so much so that fear easily overcomes them. What hope, then, can we have in this world? How can men and women find themselves, and find hope, again? Not through mere reasoning or strategies. Here, then, is the secret to life, what brings us out of anonymity: fixing our gaze on the face of Jesus and gaining familiarity with Him. Looking at Jesus purifies our vision and prepares us to look at everything with new eyes. In encountering Jesus, in looking at the Son of

Man, the poor and the simple find themselves again; they feel deeply loved by a Love without measure. Think of the Unnamed from “The Betrothed,” who finds himself in front of Cardinal Federigo, who embraces him: “The Unnamed freed himself from that embrace, put one hand over his eyes, and raised his face, saying: ‘O truly great and truly merciful God! Now I know myself, now I understand what I am!’” (A. Manzoni, *The Betrothed*, London: Penguin Classics, 1972, 418). We, too, have been looked upon, chosen and embraced, as the prophet Ezekiel reminds us in that stupendous allegory of a love story with his people: “You were the daughter of foreigners, you were thrown out; but then I passed by and washed you and you became mine” (cfr *Ezek.* 16). We too were “foreigners,” and the Lord came and gave us a name and an identity.

At a time when people are often faceless, anonymous figures, because they have no one on whom they can fix their eyes, the poem from Saint John Paul II reminds us that we exist only in as much as we are in relationship. Pope Francis loves to highlight this by referencing the Gospel account of the call of Matthew: “On a day like any other, as Matthew, the tax collector, was seated at his table, Jesus passed by, saw him, came up to him and said: ‘Follow me.’ Matthew got up and followed him. Jesus looked at him. How strong was the love in that look of Jesus, which moved Matthew to do what he did! What power must have been in his eyes to make Matthew get up from his table! [...] Jesus stopped; he did not quickly turn away. He looked at Matthew calmly, peacefully. He looked at him with eyes of mercy; he looked at him as no one had ever looked at him before. And that look unlocked Matthew’s heart; it set him free, it healed him, it gave him hope, a new life” (Homily, Plaza de la Revolución, Holguín [Cuba], 21 September 2015).

This is what makes the Christian a presence in the world different from any other, because a Christian proclaims that for which the men and women of our time—without knowing it—have the greatest thirst: the One who is life’s hope is among us. We will be “original” if our faces are the mirror of the face of the risen Christ. And this will be possible if we grow in that awareness to which Jesus invited his disciples, for example that time after they were sent out on mission: “The seventy-two returned rejoicing,” because of the miracles they performed; but Jesus tells them, “rejoice [rather] because your names are written in heaven” (*Lk* 10:20-21). This is the greatest miracle. This is the origin of the profound joy that nothing and no one can take from us: our name is written in heaven, and not because of our merits, but because of a gift each of us received with Baptism. A gift that we are called to share with everyone, excluding no one. This is what it means to be missionary disciples.

The Holy Father hopes that the Meeting can always be a place of welcome, where people can “fix their eyes upon faces,” in an experience of their own unmistakable identities. This is the most beautiful way to celebrate this anniversary, looking forward without nostalgia or fear, ever sustained by the presence of Jesus, immersed in His body, the Church. May the grateful memory of these four decades of tireless effort and creative apostolic work inspire new energy for this witness of a faith open to the vast horizons of today’s urgent needs.

His Holiness invokes the maternal protection of the Virgin Mary and wholeheartedly imparts his Apostolic Blessing on Your Excellency and the entire community of the Meeting.

I add my own personal greetings and take this opportunity to offer you my respectful good wishes

Yours devotedly in the Lord,

Cardinal PIETRO PAROLIN
Secretary of State