

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

Vatican City, 5 August 2020

N. 501.473

Your Reverend Excellency,

The Holy Father wishes to convey, through you, his wishes for the success of the 41st *Meeting for Friendship Amongst Peoples*, which will primarily take place in a virtual forum. To the organizers and all those who will participate, Pope Francis assures his closeness and his prayer.

Who has not felt closer to others in this dramatic time of the pandemic? “We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented. The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives” (FRANCIS, *Extraordinary Moment of Prayer*, Parvis of St Peter’s Basilica, 27 March 2020).

The theme of this year’s meeting, “Devoid of Wonder We Remain Deaf to the Sublime,” (A.J. HESCHEL, *God in Search of Man*, New York 1955, 251) offers a precious and original contribution at a dizzying moment in history. In the seeking material goods instead of *the* good, many have focused exclusively on their own strengths, on their ability to produce and to earn, rejecting that attitude which makes up the child’s gaze on reality: *wonder and astonishment*. Commenting on this, G.K. Chesterton wrote: “The most unfathomable schools and sages have never attained to the gravity which dwells in the eyes of a baby of three months old. It is the gravity of astonishment at the universe, and astonishment at the universe is not mysticism, but a transcendent common-sense” (*The Defendant*, Dover 2013, 70).

This brings to mind Jesus’s invitation to become like children (cf. Mt 18:3), as well as the wonder in front of being which was the basis of philosophy in ancient Greece. It is this amazement that sets life in motion, allowing it to start again in any circumstance. “Amazement is what we should feel, for life is a gift that constantly gives us a chance to make a new start,” Pope Francis said, going on to reiterate the necessity of being renewed in wonder in order to live. “Without amazement, life becomes dull and routine, and so it is with faith. The Church too needs to renew her amazement at being the dwelling place of the living God, the Bride of the Lord, a Mother who gives birth to her children” (Homily, January 1, 2019).

In recent months, we have experienced that dimension of amazement that takes the form of compassion in the presence of suffering, fragility and the precariousness of existence. This noble human feeling pushed doctors and nurses to face the dire challenge of Coronavirus with extreme dedication and admirable effort. That same feeling full of affection for their students inspired many

teachers to take on the burden of distance learning to guarantee the completion of the academic year. In the same way, it allowed many to find in the faces and presence of their families the strength to face discomfort and difficulties.

In this light, the theme of the *Meeting* can be a powerful reminder for us to descend into the depths of the human heart, suspended by the rope of wonder. How can a person help but feel that original sense of awe in front of the spectacle of a mountain panorama, or listening to music that resonates in the soul, or the simple existence of those who love us and the gift of creation? Wonder is truly the road to recognize the *signs of the sublime*, of that Mystery who is at the root and foundation of all things. In fact, “not only does a human heart present itself as a sign, but so does all of reality. In order to question oneself before the signs it is necessary to have an extremely human capacity, the first one we have as men and women: wonder. The capacity for wonder, as Giussani calls it. Only wonder knows” (J.M. BERGOGLIO, in A. Savorana, *Life of Luigi Giussani*, Montreal 2018, 1021). This is why J.L. Borges could say, “Emotions all pass, only wonder remains” (Interview entitled *Il deserto e il labirinto [The Desert and the Labyrinth]*).

If we do not cultivate this outlook, we become blind to existence: closed in on ourselves, we are attracted to ephemeral things and stop asking questions about reality. Even in the desert of the pandemic, we saw the reemergence of questions that were often dormant: What is the meaning of life, of suffering, or of death? “Man cannot be satisfied with reduced or partial answers that force him to ignore or forget some aspect of reality. He has within himself a yearning for infiniteness, an infinite sadness, a nostalgia that can only be satisfied with an equally infinite answer. Life would be an absurd desire, if that answer did not exist” (J.M. BERGOGLIO, in *Life of Luigi Giussani*, cit., 1021).

Many people have gone in search of answers, or even just questions about the meaning of life, something we all aspire to find, perhaps without realizing it. The result was something that appeared to be a paradox: instead of extinguishing our deepest thirst, for many people being confined reawakened the capacity to marvel at people and events that they took for granted before. This dramatic circumstance has restored in us, at least for a while, a more genuine appreciation for life, without that tangle of distractions and preconceptions that cloud our gaze, blur our view of things, cancel out wonder and keep us from asking ourselves who we are.

In the midst of the public health crisis, the Pope received a letter from a group of artists thanking him for praying for them during a Mass in Casa Santa Marta. After receiving it, he responded, “Artists enable us to understand what *beauty* is, and the Gospel cannot be understood without beauty” (*Morning Meditation*, May 7, 2020). Among those who have demonstrated how critical the experience of beauty is for the discovery of truth is theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, who wrote, “In a world without beauty, the good also loses its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out. Man stands before the good and asks himself why *it* must be done and not rather its alternative, evil. For this, too, is a possibility, and even the more exciting one. In a world that no longer has enough confidence in itself to affirm the beautiful, the proofs of the truth have lost their cogency. The logic of these answers is itself a mechanism which no longer captivates anyone. The very conclusions are no longer conclusive” (*Glory of the Lord* 1, San Francisco, 2009, 19-20).

Consequently, the organizing theme of the *Meeting* poses a decisive challenge for Christians, who are called to witness the deep attractive force of the beauty of faith, “the attraction of Jesus,” to use an expression that was dear to Servant of God Luigi Giussani. The Holy Father expressed this,

with reference to catechesis, in what is commonly believed to be the programmatic document of his pontificate: “Every expression of true beauty can thus be acknowledged as a path leading to an encounter with the Lord Jesus. If, as St. Augustine says, we love only that which is beautiful, the incarnate Son, as the revelation of infinite beauty, is supremely lovable and draws us to himself with bonds of love. So a formation in the *via pulchritudinis* ought to be part of our effort to pass on the faith” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 167).

The Pope, therefore, invites you to continue collaborating with him in witnessing the experience of the beauty of God, who became flesh so that our eyes might be amazed at seeing his face and our gaze might find in him the wonder of being alive. It is as Pope St. John Paul II, whose hundredth anniversary of birth we recently celebrated, once said: “It is worthwhile being man because you, Jesus, were man!” (*Homily*, April 15, 1984). Is not this stupefying discovery the greatest contribution Christians have to offer to sustain the hope of men and women? It is a task we cannot shirk, especially not in this anguished moment of history. It is the call to shine forth the beauty that has changed our lives, to be concrete witnesses of the love that saves, especially for those who are suffering the most right now.

With these sentiments, the Holy Father whole-heartedly imparts his Apostolic Blessing on Your Excellency and the entire community of the *Meeting*, asking everyone to continue to pray for him. Let me add my own greetings, and assure you of my heartfelt respect.

Yours devotedly in the Lord,

Cardinal PIETRO PAROLIN  
*Secretary of State*