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## Pope Francis: “May Venice be a city of human fraternity”

In the ‘enchanted city’ of Venice, **Pope Francis** - the first Pope ever to visit the Venice Biennale - chose to turn his gaze first to the deeply moved and emotional faces of the inmates at the Women's Prison on the island of Giudecca, as he invited the Holy See's pavilion to do, to tell them that “You have a special place in my heart.” This was followed by a meeting with the artists, to whom Francis reminded that art “has the status of a city of refuge.” The Pope then transferred by motorboat to the Basilica of Santa Maria della Salute - whose icon, so dear to the Venetians, was exceptionally transported to St Mark's Square – for the meeting with young people, whom he urged to stand up, “not to sit on the couch, and to be creators of new things. Think within yourselves of the children you will have.” The final invitation of the homily evoked the suggestive image of a specially built pontoon bridge that Francis crossed in a golf cart to reach St Mark's Square, the site of one of the most inspiring basilicas in the world. May Venice, the city on water, be “a symbol of beauty accessible to all, a place for fostering fraternity.”

“No-one can take away a person's dignity, no-one!”,

was the Pope's reminder to female detainees in the Giudecca Women's Prison in his first speech in Venice. “Prison is a harsh reality, and problems such as overcrowding, the lack of facilities and resources, and episodes of violence, give rise to a great deal of suffering there”, Francis said, adding that: “it can also become a place of rebirth, of moral and material rebirth, where the dignity of women and men is not ‘placed in isolation’, but promoted.” “So, paradoxically, a stay in prison can mark the beginning of something new”, he went on to propose: “it can become a building site for reconstruction, in which to courageously look at and evaluate one's own life, remove what is not needed, what is cluttering, harmful or dangerous, draw up a plan, and then start again by digging foundations and going back, in the light of experience, to putting brick upon brick, together, with determination.”

“Do not isolate dignity, but give new possibilities!”,

was Francis' invitation: “it is fundamental also for the prison system to offer detainees the tools and room for human growth, for spiritual, cultural and professional growth, creating the conditions for their healthy reintegration”, he remarked.

“The world needs artists.”

Meeting with artists at the Church of La Maddalena (Prison Chapel), the Pope expressed the hope that “the various artistic practices” will establish themselves everywhere “as a sort of network of cities of refuge, cooperating to rid the world of the senseless and by now empty oppositions that seek to gain ground in racism, in xenophobia, in inequality, in ecological imbalance and aporophobia, that terrible neologism that means fear of the poor.” **“Imagine cities that do not yet exist on the maps:** cities where no human being is considered a stranger”, is the Pope's message to the artists, along with an appeal to “distinguish clearly art from the market” and to “value the contribution of women.” **“Our God always surprises us. It is very important to be prepared for God's surprises!”**, the Pope said in unscripted remarks addressing young people gathered in the square in front of the Basilica of *Santa Maria della Salute*. “Rise to stand in front of life, not to sit on the couch”, is the Pope's first recommendation. “When you feel this way, please, change your ‘mindset’”: is the recipe to overcome moments when “you see everything in a shade of gray”: “do not look at yourself with your eyes, but think of how God looks upon you. God knows that, besides being beautiful, we are fragile, and the two things go together. It is a bit like Venice, which is splendid and delicate at the

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same time. It is beautiful and delicate; it has some fragilities that need to be cared for.” The other secret recipe, for Francis, is perseverance, in a world marked by “quick emotions, momentary sensations, instincts that last for mere moments.”

“You can use the cellphone, but meet people”,

the Pope’s guidance: “A young man who does not feel the capacity to fall in love or to be loving towards others, is missing something. when you are married and have a son, a daughter, you will have made something that did not exist previously!

Think within yourselves of the children you will have: do not be professionals of compulsive typing, but creators of new things!”

“Venice is one with the waters upon which it sits. Without the care and safeguarding of this natural environment, it might even cease to exist”, is the Pope’s snapshot in his homily for the Holy Mass celebrated in Saint Mark’s Square, addressing a crowd of approximately 11 thousand people. “When we look at this city of Venice today, we admire its enchanting beauty, but we are also concerned about the many challenges it is confronted with”, Francis’ warning cry: “Climate change, which affects the water in the Lagoon and the surrounding area; the fragility of its buildings and cultural heritage, but also its inhabitants; the challenge of creating a people-friendly environment through appropriate tourism management; and everything that these realities risk generating in terms of frayed social relations, individualism and loneliness.” **The faithful are called to “bring the fruits of the Gospel into the reality in which we live:** fruits of justice and peace; fruits of solidarity and mutual care; carefully planned choices to preserve our environmental and human heritage. Our Christian communities, our neighbourhoods, our cities must become places of welcome, of inclusion.” “And Venice, always a land of encounter and cultural exchange, is called to be a sign of beauty accessible to all, starting with the most disadvantaged, a sign of solidarity and care for our common home”, the Pope concluded: “a land that fosters human fraternity.”

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