SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE
BOLLETTINO

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIÈGE PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE SALA DE IMPRENSA DA SANTA SÉ
BIURO PRASOWE STOLICY APOSTOLSKIEJ دار الصحافة التابعة للكرسي الرسولي

N. 170613d

Tuesday 13.06.2017

Press Conference for the presentation of the Message for the first World Day of the Poor 2017

At 11.00 this morning, in the Holy See Press Office in Via della Conciliazione 54, a press conference was held for the presentation of the Message for the first World Day of the Poor, instituted by Pope Francis at the end of the Jubilee of Mercy on the 33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time (this year on 19 November 2017).

The speakers were:

- **His Excellency Msgr. Rino Fisichella**, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization;

- **His Excellency Msgr.José Octavio Ruiz Arenas**, secretary of the same Pontifical Council.

The following are the interventions by the president and the secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization:

Intervention by Msgr. Rino Fisichella

Last year, on Sunday 13 November, while in all the cathedrals in the world the Doors of Mercy were closed, Pope Francis celebrated in St. Peter's Basilica the Jubilee dedicated to all socially marginalized persons. In his homily, the Pope said: "Today … when we speak of exclusion, we immediately think of concrete people, not useless objects but precious persons. The human person, set by God at the pinnacle of creation, is often discarded, set aside in favour of ephemeral things. This is unacceptable, because in God's eyes man is the most precious good. It is ominous that we are growing used to this rejection. We should be worried when our consciences are anaesthetized and we no longer see the brother or sister suffering at our side, or notice the grave problems in our world. … Today, in the cathedrals and sanctuaries throughout the world, the Doors of Mercy are being closed. Let us ask for the grace not to close our eyes to God who sees us and to our neighbour who asks something of us … especially to our brothers and sisters who are forgotten and excluded, to the 'Lazarus' at our door. That is where the Church's magnifying glass is pointed. … In the light of these reflections, I would like today to be the 'day of the poor'".

The final phrase was not in the text of the homily prepared for this event. Pope Francis pronounced it spontaneously, looking at the thousands of poor people who were present at the Eucharistic celebration and with whom he had spoken in the preceding days. They had expressed to him their difficulties, along with the deepest desires they carried in their hearts; the Pope had embraced them at length with emotion and intensity. Probably it was precisely the gaze and the tears of those people that had remained strongly impressed upon him at the moment when, raising his eyes from the text, he announced his wish for a "day of the poor". His desire, in any case, immediately became a reality. As he signed in St. Peter's Square the Letter *Misericordia et misera*, Pope Francis added at the end, "I had the idea that, as yet another tangible sign of this Extraordinary Holy Year, the entire Church might celebrate, on the Thirty-Third Sunday of Ordinary Time, the *World Day of the Poor*. This would be the worthiest way to prepare for the celebration of the Solemnity of our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, who identified with the little ones and the poor and who will judge us on our works of mercy (cf. *Mt* 25:31-46). It would be a day to help communities and each of the baptized to reflect on how poverty is at the very heart of the Gospel and that, as long as Lazarus lies at the door of our homes (cf. *Lk* 16:19-21), there can be no justice or social peace. This Day will also represent a genuine form of new evangelization (cf. *Mt* 11:5) which can renew the face of the Church as she perseveres in her perennial activity of pastoral conversion and witness to mercy" (no.21).

On this horizon, then, it is necessary to place the ***Message for the First World Day of the Poor***, which will be celebrated in all the Church this coming 19 November, Thirty-Third Sunday of Ordinary Time, and which will be presented today. As the Holy Father's *Message* states, "to the World Days instituted by my Predecessors, which are already a tradition in the life of our communities, I wish to add this one, which adds to them an exquisitely evangelical fullness, that is, Jesus' preferential love for the poor" (no.6).

This will be a day in which all the Christian community should be able to reach a hand to the poor, to the weak, to the men and women whose dignity is too often trampled. The *Message* recalls the biblical expression of the First Letter of John: These are the words of the Evangelist, with which Pope Francis introduces his *Message*. The exhortation expresses an imperative no Christian can renounce. The reference to the opposition between action, concrete service rendered to the least among us, and the void that words alone often conceal. The Pope insists on this point: "We may think of the poor simply as the beneficiaries of our occasional volunteer work, or of impromptu acts of generosity that appease our conscience. However good and useful such acts may be for making us sensitive to people's needs and the injustices that are often their cause, they ought to lead to a true encounter with the poor and a sharing that becomes a way of life" (no. 3).

The *Message*, which is presented today in eight languages (Italian, French, English, German, Polish, Spanish, Portuguese and Arabic) revolves around two expressions that outline its deeper meaning and summarise it. The first is "This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him". The Church cannot be insensitive to the cry of the poor; from the very beginning of her history and throughout the centuries, the Christian community, abandoning all rhetoric, placed herself at the service of those most in need, because she "realized that being a disciple of Jesus meant demonstrating fraternity and solidarity, in obedience to the Master's proclamation that the poor are blessed and heirs to the Kingdom of heaven (cf. Mt 5:3)" (no. 2). Certainly, the Pope mentions the fact that there have been moments in the Church's history in which the cry of the poor has not been listened to with the due attention; yet, even in those exceptional moments, there has been no lack of "men and women who, in a variety of ways, have devoted their lives to the service of the poor", writing pages of history in which there emerges the fantasy of Christian charity. The second expression relates to the term *sharing*. Starting from the example of St. Francis, who "was not satisfied to embrace lepers and give them alms", but rather understood that true charity consisted in staying together, close to one another, sharing the pain and suffering of disease as well as the hardship of marginalization, the Pope proposes as a lifestyle for believers those of encounter with the poor to lead to a sharing that becomes a style of life (No. 3).

The challenge that is to be posed, as is known, consists in moving away from indifference, from the certainties and comforts that are often the privileged places of a wealthy culture, to recognize that poverty also constitutes a value by which we can measure ourselves. Indeed, Christians know that poverty is also a vocation to follow the poor Jesus: "Poverty means having a humble heart that accepts our creaturely limitations and sinfulness and thus enables us to overcome the temptation to feel omnipotent and immortal. Poverty is an interior attitude that avoids looking upon money, career and luxury as our goal in life and the condition for our happiness. … Poverty,

understood in this way, is the yardstick that allows us to judge how best to use material goods and to build relationships that are neither selfish nor possessive" (No. 4).

Pope Francis, in this *Message*, does not conceal the difficulties that emerge especially in our days in identifying poverty in a clear way. He speaks of the myriad "faces marked by suffering, marginalization, oppression, violence, torture and imprisonment, war, deprivation of freedom and dignity, ignorance and illiteracy, medical emergencies and shortage of work, trafficking and slavery, exile, extreme poverty and forced migration. Poverty has the face of women, men and children exploited by base interests, crushed by the machinations of power and money". In summary, it is a "a bitter and endless list" that continually lengthens due to "the greed of a chosen few, and generalized indifference".

The therapy that could help alleviate this grave pathology is found in the form of *reciprocity*: the poor person is reached by God's tenderness and mercy through those who wish to truly encounter the countenance of Christ; in the same way, those who have lost their dignity and are at the margins, who are afflicted by abuse and violence, provoke Christians to rediscover the sense of evangelical poverty that is impressed upon their everyday life.

The dimension of reciprocity is found in the logo of the World Day of the Poor. There is an open door, and on the threshold, two people. They both have their hand outstretched: one to ask for help, the other to offer it. Indeed, it is difficult to understand which one of the two is truly poor. Or better, both of them are poor. The one who outstretches his hand asking for sharing; the one who offers his hand to help is invited to go out and share. They are two outstretched hands that encounter each other where each one has something to offer. Two arms that express solidarity and suggest not remaining on the threshold, but instead going towards the other. The poor person can enter in the house, once from the house it is understood that the help is sharing. Pope Francis' words in the *Message* become even more expressive in this context: "Blessed, therefore, are the open hands that embrace the poor and help them: they are hands that bring hope. Blessed are the hands that reach beyond every barrier of culture, religion and nationality, and pour the balm of consolation over the wounds of humanity. Blessed are the open hands that ask nothing in exchange, with no 'ifs' or 'buts' or 'maybes': they are hands that call down God's blessing upon their brothers and sisters" (No. 5).

The Holy Father's invitation is addressed to the entire Church, and to men and women of good will; they are all provoked to listen to the cry for help of the poor. Irrespective of their religion, the colour of their skin of the nation to which they belong, they are all called upon not to turn away. Christians are asked to make their own the culture of encounter, to break down the walls, boundaries and barriers raised by selfishness and fear. We are all reminded that solidarity and brotherhood are proper and worthy of man and constitute the original gift destined for humanity without exclusion. Just as poverty knows no boundaries or barriers, as it is extended to the entire world, so solidarity needs to be recognized as an expression of genuine fraternity for all.

In a more concrete way, the particular Churches are invited to find all the most suitable forms to offer continuity to what already exists and marks the life of the vast world of voluntary work. Pope Francis asks that all commit themselves, especially during the preceding week, to "create moments of encounter and friendship, solidarity and concrete assistance" (No. 7). The poor and volunteers are asked to participate together in the holy Sunday Mass and subsequently to welcome the poor as "honoured guests at our table". To enable priests and the voluntary sphere to live these moments even more intensely, the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization has enabled a *pastoral subsidy* which will be available from the month of September.

Pope Francis will be directly involved in the celebration of this Day, during which he will preside at the Holy Mass in St. Peter's Basilica, along with many poor people and volunteers. For volunteers in particular there will be a preparatory Vigil on Saturday 18 November in the Church of St. Lawrence Outside-the-Walls in remembrance of the great Roman saint who, raising the figure of the poor person as the true and only "treasure" of the Church, delivered himself to martyrdom, in perennial witness to his service of charity. It will also be a moment for expressing thanks for those who every day, and in silence, live their service of assistance to the poor, and an invitation for many others to join themselves to their witness.

Pope Francis' intentions in this *Message* that he sends today to all the Church, relate to the hope that this World

Day become “a powerful appeal to our consciences as believers, allowing us to grow in the conviction that sharing with the poor enables us to understand the deepest truth of the Gospel. The poor are not a problem: they are a resource from which to draw as we strive to accept and practise in our lives the essence of the Gospel” (No. 9).

Intervention by Msgr.José Octavio Ruiz Arenas

The Church, ever since the beginning, has concerned herself with the poor; indeed, from the very first centuries her commitment to helping and sharing has been a luminous sign of authenticity. Admiration for the love, sincere interest and aid to the poor has led many people to adhere to the Christian faith. The key criterion for authenticity resides in the fact that the poor were not forgotten (cf. *Gal* 2: 10).

If we look at the history of the Church, we find innumerable expressions of this love and help for the poor. There are many institutions for assistance in the field of health, education, protection for those who are alone or abandoned, which are the fruit of the generosity of many believers. We cannot forget that Jesus, Son of God, made Himself man and lived in poverty. His words and His gestures were the expression of his preference for the poor and for this reason, when the Church welcomes and helps those in need, she does so because she recognizes in them the image and presence of Christ.

The most recent popes, especially St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI, reiterated the importance of a preferential option for the poor, and their magisterial writings are a permanent invitation to all the Church to respond with devotion and generosity, helping society so that the goods necessary for a decent life are not denied to anyone.

Pope Francis states that for the Church the option for the poor is first and foremost a theological, rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical category, and considers such an option as a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which all the tradition of the Church bears witness. For this reason he insists greatly on the urgency of the social inclusion of the poor and dedicated special attention to this aspect in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. Every Christian and every community, says Pope Francis, is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, so that they can be fully integrated into society; this presupposes the commitment of all to be obedient and attentive in listening to the cry of the poor, and to going to their aid.

In instituting the *World Day of the Poor*, the Pope wishes for all Christians to be aware of the need to find and touch Christ in the flesh of the poor. It is, therefore, a Day for raising awareness of the need of the first order that comes from Christ Himself. The Pope reminds us that without a preferential option for the poor, “the proclamation of the Gospel, which is itself the prime form of charity, risks being misunderstood or submerged by the ocean of words which daily engulfs us in today’s society of mass communications”. Therefore, Pope Francis is consistent in what he preaches and lives, and exhorts us so that no-one may feel exonerated from concerns for the poor and for social justice.