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**BOLLETTINO**

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### **Audience with members of the Confederation of Italian Cooperatives**

At 11.40 this morning, in the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the Confederation of Italian Cooperatives, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of its founding.

The following is the Pope's address to those present during the meeting:

#### **Address of the Holy Father**

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I welcome you all! I thank your president for the words he addressed to me, in particular for the summary he gave of your work and your effort: he also grasped what is most important to me, giving us a wise vision of the current context in which we live. And I thank you also for the witness of a cooperative that has been able to go forward.

The hundred years of history of your work constitutes an important milestone that cannot pass by in silence. They represent a journey for which we are to be grateful for all that you have managed to achieve, inspired by the great call of Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical *Rerum novarum*. This Pontiff, in a prophetic way, initiated the great reflection on the social doctrine of the Church. His was an intuition that flourished from the conviction that the Gospel may not be relegated only to a part of man or of society, but rather speaks to all man, to make him ever more human. Pope Leo wrote in difficult times, but every age has its hardships and its difficulties.

Your history is precious because it is born from taking the Pope's words seriously and making them concrete through serious and generous effort lasting a century. It is a strong sign of hope when the social doctrine of the Church does not remain as a dead word or an abstract discourse, but rather becomes living thanks to men and women of good will, who give it flesh and concreteness, transforming it into personal and social gestures, concrete, visible and useful.

Today too the Church not only needs to say the truth out loud; she is always in need of men and women who transform into concrete goods what the pastors preach and theologians teach. In this sense, today, to say “thank you” to you for your hundred years of effort is also to show an example for the men of our time, who need to discover that they are not only “takers” of good, but “entrepreneurs” of charity.

Your cooperative model, precisely because it is inspired by the social doctrine of the Church, corrects certain tendencies typical of collectivism and statism, which are sometimes lethal to private initiatives; and at the same time, it curbs the temptations of individualism and selfishness typical of liberalism. In fact, while the capitalist enterprise aims primarily at profit, the cooperative enterprise has as its primary purpose the balanced and proportionate satisfaction of social needs. Certainly the cooperative must also aim to produce profits, to be effective and efficient in its economic activity, but all this without losing sight of mutual solidarity.

For this reason the model of the social cooperative is one of the new sectors on which cooperation is now concentrating, since it manages to combine, on the one hand, the logic of the company and, on the other, that of solidarity: internal solidarity towards its members and external solidarity towards recipients. This way of living the cooperative model already exerts a significant influence on companies which are too bound to the logic of profit, as it pushes them to discover and evaluate the impact of social responsibility. In this way, they are invited to consider not only the economic budget, but also the social one, realizing that it is necessary to contribute to responding to the needs of those involved in the enterprise as well as those of the territory and the community. It is in this way that cooperative work carries out its prophetic function and provides social witness in the light of the Gospel.

But we must never forget that this vision of cooperation, based on relationships and not on profit, runs counter to the mentality of the world. Only if we discover that our true wealth is relations and not merely material goods will we find alternative ways to live and inhabit a society that is not governed by the god of money, an idol that deludes and leaves it increasingly inhuman and unjust, and also, I would say, poorer.

Thank you for your demanding work, which believes in cooperation and expresses the obstinacy to remain human in a world that wants to commodify everything. And on obstinacy, we have heard this sister of ours who bore witness today: it takes obstinacy to go forward on this path when the logic of the world goes in another direction. I thank you for your obstinacy, and this is not a sin! Go ahead like this.

But the most important and obvious advantage of cooperation is defeating the loneliness that turns life into hell. When man feels alone, he experiences hell. When, on the other hand, he is aware that he is not abandoned, then he can face any kind of difficulty or hardship. And we see this in the worst moments. In this way, as your president recalled that in a cooperative “one plus one makes three”, it is also necessary to remember that in bad moments, one plus one makes a half. In this way [cooperation] ensures that bad things can be made better. Our world is sick as a result of loneliness – we all know this – and this is why it needs initiatives that allow it to face together with others what life imposes. By walking and working together we experience the great miracle of hope: everything seems possible again. In this sense, cooperation is a way of making hope real in people’s lives.

We could thus say that cooperation is another way of discerning the proximity that Jesus taught in the Gospel. Being close means preventing the other from being held hostage by the hell of loneliness. Unfortunately the news often tells us of people who take their own lives driven by desperation nurtured in solitude. We cannot remain indifferent to these tragedies, and everyone, according to their possibilities, must commit himself to take a piece of solitude from others. It should be done not so much with words, but above all with commitment, love, competence, and bringing into play the great added value that is our personal presence. It must be done with closeness, with tenderness. This word, tenderness, which risks being dropped from the dictionary because current society does not use it much. Only when we participate directly can we make a difference.

For example, it is solidarity to commit yourself to giving equally paid work to all; enabling the farmers made more fragile by the market to be part of a community that strengthens them and supports them; a solitary fisherman to join a group of colleagues; a porter to be part of a team, and so on. In this way, cooperating becomes a way of life. So: cooperating is a style of life. “I live, but alone, I do my own thing and go ahead...”. It is a way of living, a

lifestyle. The other, instead, is: "I live with others, in cooperation". It is another style of life, and we choose this.

"And again [Jesus] entered Capernaum after some days, and it was heard that He was in the house. Immediately many gathered together, so that there was no longer room to receive them, not even near the door. And He preached the word to them. Then they came to Him, bringing a paralytic who was carried by four men. And when they could not come near Him because of the crowd, they uncovered the roof where He was. So when they had broken through, they let down the bed on which the paralytic was lying. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven you." (2: 1-5). And then He healed him.

When we think of this page of the Gospel we are immediately attracted by the great miracle of forgiveness and subsequently of the physical healing of this man; but perhaps another miracle escapes us: that of his friends. Those four men carry the paralytic on their shoulders; they do not remain indifferent to the suffering of their sick friend; they are not camouflaged in the crowd with everyone else, listening to Jesus. These men perform a miraculous gesture: they get together and, with a winning and creative strategy, find the way not only to take charge of this man, but help him meet the One Who can change his life. And not being able to do it in the simplest way, they have the courage to climb onto the roof and uncover it. They are the ones who open up the gap through which the paralytic can approach Jesus and come out of that encounter a changed man. The Evangelist notes that when Jesus turned to the man He "saw their faith", that is, the faith of the whole group: the paralytic and his friends.

In this sense we can say that cooperation is a way of "taking the roof off" an economy that risks producing goods at the cost of social injustice. It means defeating the inertia of indifference and individualism by doing something alternative and not just complaining. Those who establish a cooperative believe in a different way of producing, a different way of working, a different way of being in society. Those who found a cooperative have something of the creativity and courage of these four friends of the paralytic. The "miracle" of cooperation is a *team strategy* that opens a gap in the wall of the indifferent crowd that excludes those who are weaker.

A society that becomes a wall, made up of the mass of many individuals who do not think and do not act like people, is not able to appreciate the fundamental value of relationships. One cannot really act as a person when one is sick from indifference and selfishness. Then, in reality, the real "paralytic" is not that man whom they carry, climbing up to place him before Jesus, the true "paralytic" is the crowd, which prevents a solution being reached. A crowd made up of individuals who look only at their own needs without noticing others, and thus never fully savour life. Individualism prevents full happiness, because it excludes the other from the horizon. When I remain blind to the suffering and fatigue of others, in reality I remain blind to what could make me happy: you cannot be happy alone. Jesus categorically says in the Gospel: "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?" (*Lk 9: 25*).

Dear brothers and sisters, we live in a world that is seized by the frenzy of possessing, and that struggles to walk as a community. Selfishness remains strong. The work you have been doing for a hundred years is setting the relationship against individualism, the team against self-interest, the well-being of all against the interests of a few.

I have already had the opportunity to recount on other occasions what impressed me with when I was 18, in 1954, listening to my father speak on this theme. Since then I became convinced that Christian cooperation is the right path. Perhaps economically it may seem slower, but it is the most effective and sure, the one that goes further.

This is why I liked the president's words, which represent with humility the great effort that cooperation has made in the country and in the world.

In particular, I am pleased to hear that you have visited the existential peripheries where vulnerability lurks most: this is the privileged place of our witness. To insist on the category of the periphery is due to the choice that Jesus, the Son of God, made in coming into the world. He chose the periphery as the centre of His mission. And He did so not only geographically, by coming into the world in a periphery of the great Roman empire, but He did

so by reaching towards every man placed in the peripheries as a result of poverty, illness or his own mistakes.

In this globalized world, we must be in tune with what the Church's social doctrine teaches when it speaks of the centrality of the person. Saint John Paul II explained this well in the Encyclical *Centesimus annus*. At one point he writes: "Whereas at one time the decisive factor of production was the land, and later capital – understood as a total complex of the instruments of production – today the decisive factor is increasingly man himself, that is ... his capacity for interrelated and compact organization, as well as his ability to perceive the needs of others and to satisfy them" (32). we should therefore understand the importance of acquiring professional skills and offering permanent training courses, especially to those people who live on the margins of society and the most disadvantaged categories.

In this regard, it is above all women who, in the world as a whole, bear the weight of material poverty, social exclusion and cultural marginalization. The theme of the woman should return among the priorities of future projects in the cooperative field. It is not an ideological matter. It is instead about taking on the thought of woman as a special point of view for learning to make cooperation not only strategic but also human. The woman sees better the love for the face of each one. The woman knows better how to make concrete what we men at times treat as overall systems.

Dear friends, I hope that the past hundred years will open up new and unprecedented levels of commitment before you, always remaining faithful to the root from which it all derived: the Gospel. Never lose sight of this source, and find in Jesus' gestures and choices what can inspire you most in your work.

I cordially bless you, I encourage you and tell you that I have a lot of hope for what you do. I am sure that it is a well-founded hope. And please do not forget to pray for me. Thank you!

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