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Press Conference to present the Holy Father Francis' Message for the Fourth World Day of the Poor

At 11.30 this morning, a press conference was broadcast in live streaming from the "John Paul II" Hall of the Holy See Press Office to present the Holy Father Francis' Message for the Fourth World Day of the Poor, on the theme "Stretch out your hand to the poor" (*Sir* 7: 32), to be held this year on 15 November, 33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time.

The speaker was Archbishop Rino Fisichella, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelisation. The following is his intervention:

Intervention by Archbishop Rino Fisichella

"Stretch out your hand to the poor" (*Sirach* 7:32) With the words of the ancient book of Sirach, Pope Francis offers his reflection for the *Fourth World Day of the Poor* to be celebrated throughout the Church on Sunday, November 15, 2020. The *Message* enters directly into the dramatic moment that the whole world has experienced because of Covid-19 and of that of the many countries still struggling in their efforts bring relief to so many innocent victims.

Pope Francis' reflection unfolds in the light of the biblical image that sees a wise man, 'Jesus son of Sirach', as he names himself in the end of the book (*Sirach* 50, 27), who lived two thousand years before the birth of Christ. The questions he asked revolved around the theme of where wisdom could be found and what meaningful answer could be offered to life's events. The Pope notes that these are the same questions that have marked the lives of millions of people during these months under the corona virus: sickness, mourning, the uncertainty of science, suffering, the privation of the freedom to which one is accustomed to, the sadness of not being able to give a last farewell to our loved ones, etc. In this circumstance, prayer has become more unceasing, and the thought of God has gently touched the minds of many persons often indifferent. This gave way to the search for a deeper spirituality as evidenced by the massive participation in different liturgical events. Pope Francis rightly highlights that the sacred author 'insists in the fact that during distress there is a need to trust God: "Do not be

impetuous in time of adversity. Cling to him; do not leave him that you may prosper in your last days. Accept whatever happens to you; in periods of humiliation be patient. For in fire gold is tested, and the chosen, in the crucible of humiliation. In sickness and in poverty trust in God, and he will help you; make your ways straight and hope in him” (no.1).

However, the book of Sirach, does not allow us to remain at just praying, rather, it says that in order to have a worthy and effective prayer, attention is needed to those living in poverty. Pope Francis says so without qualifications when he writes, “Prayer to God and solidarity with the poor and suffering are inseparable. In order to celebrate a worship that is pleasing to the Lord, it is necessary to recognise that all persons, even the most destitute and despised, carry the image of God impressed on themselves. From this realisation derives the gift of divine blessing, attracted by the generosity practiced towards of the poor” (no. 2).

The focus on the ‘image of God’ impressed on the face of the poor is extremely significant because it forces us not to look elsewhere when we want to live a fully Christian existence. In this sense, the metaphor of ‘*stretch out your hand*’ takes on its deepest value because it forces us to face words of the Lord who wished to identify himself with those lacking the essentials and who live in conditions of social and existential marginalisation. The Message points out several situations that during these months under the pandemic have evidenced an outstretched hand and that have become etched in everyone’s mind: “The outstretched hand of the doctor who cares about each patient by trying to find the right treatment. The outstretched hand of the nurse who, well beyond her or his working hours, remains to look after the sick. The outstretched hand of those who work in administration and provide the means to save as many lives as possible. The outstretched hand of the pharmacist exposed to numerous questions in a risky contact with the people. The outstretched hand of the priest who blesses with grief in his heart. The outstretched hand of the volunteer who helps those who live on the street and those who, despite having a roof, have nothing to eat. The outstretched hand of men and women who work to offer essential services and protection. And other outstretched hands, we could still describe up to composing a litany of good works. All these hands have defied contagion and fear in order to give support and consolation” (no. 6).

In the face of these signs of outstanding humanity and responsibility, Pope Francis contrasts the image of those who continue to keep ‘their hands in their pockets and do not let themselves be moved by poverty, of which they are often accomplices’ (no. 9). The list of these individuals, fortunately shorter, in testimony that the good is always far superior to the greed of a few, describes scenes of everyday life: “There are outstretched hands to quickly touch the keyboard of a computer and move money from one part to the other side of the world, decreeing the wealth of restricted oligarchies and the misery of multitudes or the failure of entire nations. There are hands stretched to accumulate money with the sale of weapons that other hands, including children, will use to sow death and poverty. There are outstretched hands that in the shadows exchange doses of death in order to enrich themselves and live in luxury and short-lived disorderliness. There are outstretched hands that exchange illegal favors for easy and corrupt gain. And there are also outstretched hands which in hypocritical respectability establish laws that they themselves do not observe” (no. 9). Tough words but unfortunately true, which show how much lack of social responsibility is still present in today’s world with the consequence of the excessive growth in extreme pockets of poverty.

The outstretched hand, therefore, is an invitation to take up the responsibility of giving one’s own contribution manifested in the gestures of daily life aimed at the alleviation of the fate of those who live in hardship and lack the dignity of the children of God. Pope Francis is not afraid to identify these persons as real saints, ‘those who live next door’ that with simplicity, without noise and publicity, offer the genuine witness of Christian love. The massive presence of many poor faces requires that Christians be always on the front line, and feel the need to know that they lack something essential the moment a poor person comes before them. ‘We cannot feel ‘that everything is fine’ when a member of the human family is relegated to the rear and becomes a shadow’ (no. 4) writes Pope Francis in his Message. It is as if he is inviting us to make ours Saint Augustine’s ‘restless heart’. To remain restless until God is found imprinted on the face of the poor.

In many ways, the image of stretch out your hand, closely recalls the logo that, from the very beginning of Pope Francis’ initiative, has accompanied the World Day of the Poor. The outstretched hands are those of two persons: one is standing on the doorstep of the house, the other one is waiting on the outside. The appeal is

striking because it evokes how much both need each other. The outstretched hand of the poor is begging, but is also asking the person on the doorstep to come out himself in order to break the circle of selfishness that surrounds everyone. The Pope's Message, therefore, is an invitation to shake off our indifference, and the frequent sense of displeasure towards the poor, in order to recover the solidarity and the love that lived generously, are giving meaning to life.

The announcement of this Message on the liturgical feast of Saint Anthony of Padua, patron of the poor, indicates that what we can do is always through the grace of God that accompanies the life of believers and the history of humanity. These words intent to assist the preparation and the realisation of the next World Day of the Poor, fully aware of the current restrictions that the laws of various countries are imposing because of the pandemic. In the coming months, in fact, due attention to safety regulations will still be required; however, requests for assistance from the poor will increase further. It will be our task, therefore, not to withhold, from the increasingly numerous poor we encounter, the daily signs that accompany our pastoral action, and the extraordinary ones that the World Day of the Poor foresees and has been carrying out for several years now.
