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Audience with Members of Italian Caritas on the fiftieth anniversary of its foundation

This morning, in the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of Italian *Caritas* on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of its foundation.

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

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome, everyone!

I thank Cardinal Bassetti and the President of Italian *Caritas*, Msgr. Redaelli, for the words they have addressed to me on behalf of everyone. Thank you. You have come from all over Italy, representing the 218 diocesan *Caritas* agencies and Italian *Caritas*, and I am happy to share this Jubilee, your fiftieth year of life, with you! You are a living part of the Church, you are "our *Caritas*", as Saint Paul VI, the Pope who wanted it and established it, loved to say. He encouraged the Italian Bishops' Conference to set up a pastoral body to promote the witness of charity in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, so that the Christian community would be an agent of charity. I confirm your task: in today's changing times there are many challenges and difficulties, there are more and more faces of the poor and complex situations throughout the territory. But, as Saint Paul VI said, "our Caritas agencies make extraordinary efforts" (*Angelus*, 18 January 1976). And this is true!

The fiftieth anniversary is a milestone for which we can thank the Lord for the journey we have made and for renewing, with his help, our momentum and our commitments. In this regard I would like to point out three ways, three roads on which to continue the journey.

The first is the way of the least. It is from them that we start, from the most fragile and defenceless. From them. If you do not start with them, then you do not understand anything. And I will permit myself to speak in confidence. The other day I heard, on this subject, words of experience, from the mouth of Don Franco, here present. He does not want us to say "Eminence", or "Cardinal Montenegro": don Franco. And he explained this to me, the

way of the last ones, because he has lived this all his life. In him, I thank many men and women who act in charity because they have lived it this way, they have understood the way of the last. Charity is the mercy that goes in search of the weakest, that goes to the most difficult frontiers to free people from the slavery that oppresses them and make them agents of their own lives. Over the past five decades, many significant decisions have helped *Caritas* and the local Churches to practise this mercy: from conscientious objection to support for voluntary work; from commitment to cooperation with the South of our planet to interventions in emergencies in Italy and around the world; from a global approach to the complex phenomenon of migration, with innovative proposals such as humanitarian corridors, to the activation of instruments capable of bringing reality closer to us, such as the Listening Centres and the Poverty and Resources Observatories. It is good to extend the paths of charity, but always keeping our gaze fixed on the least among us, in all times. To broaden our gaze, but starting from the eyes of the poor person in front of us. That is where we learn. If we are unable to look into the eyes of the poor, to look them in the eye, to touch them with an embrace, with a hand, we will do nothing. It is with their eyes that we need to look at reality, because by looking at the eyes of the poor we are looking at reality in a different way from our own mentality. History should not be viewed from the perspective of the winners, who make it appear beautiful and perfect, but from the perspective of the poor, because that is the perspective of Jesus. It is the poor who put their finger on the sore point of our contradictions and disturb our conscience in a healthy way, inviting us to change. And when our heart, our conscience, when we look at the poor, at the poor people, is not troubled, stop..., we should stop: something is not right.

A second indispensable way: the way of the Gospel. I refer to the style of having, which is just one: indeed, that of the Gospel. It is the style of humble love, tangible but not ostentatious, which proposes itself but never imposes. It is the style of freely-given love, which does not seek recompense. It is the style of willingness and of service, in imitation of Jesus who made Himself our servant. It is the style described by Saint Paul, when he says that love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor 13: 7). I am struck by the word “all”. All. It is said to us, we who like to make distinctions. All. Love is inclusive, it is not concerned only with the material aspect, nor even the spiritual one. The salvation of Jesus embraces the entire person. We need a charity dedicated to the integral development of the person: a spiritual, material and intellectual charity. It is the integral style you have experienced in great catastrophes, and also through twinning, a beautiful experience of all-round alliance in charity between Churches in Italy, in Europe and throughout the world. But this – you are well aware – must not arise only when there are calamities: we need *Caritas* and the Christian communities always to be seeking to serve the whole person, because “man is the way for the Church”, according to Saint John Paul II’s concise expression (see Encyclical Letter *Redemptor hominis*, 14).

The way of the Gospel shows us that Jesus is present in every poor person. It is good for us to remember this to free ourselves from the temptation, ever present, of ecclesiastical self-referentiality and to be a Church of tenderness and closeness, where the poor are blessed, where the mission is at the centre, where joy is born of service. Let us remember that the style of God is the style of closeness, compassion and tenderness. This is the style of God. There are two evangelical maps that help us not to lose our way: the Beatitudes (Mt 5: 3-12) and Matthew 25 (verses 31-46). In the Beatitudes, the plight of the poor is clothed in hope and their consolation becomes reality, while the words of the final Judgement – the protocol according to which we will be judged – make us find Jesus present in the poor of every age. And from the Lord’s strong expressions of judgement we also derive the invitation to the *parrhesia* of denunciation. It is never a polemic against anyone, but a prophecy for all: it is proclaiming human dignity when it is trampled upon, it is making the stifled cry of the poor heard, it is giving a voice to those who have none.

And the third way is the way of *creativity*. The rich experience of these fifty years is not a baggage of things to be repeated; it is the basis on which to build in order to constantly develop what Saint John Paul II called the creativity of charity (cf. Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 50). Do not be discouraged by the growing numbers of new poor and new forms of poverty. There are many and they are growing! Continue to cultivate dreams of fraternity and to be signs of hope. Immunise yourselves against the virus of pessimism by sharing the joy of being one big family. In this fraternal atmosphere, the Holy Spirit, who is creator and creative, and also a poet, will suggest new ideas, suited to the times in which we live.

And now - after this Lenten sermon! - I would like to say thank you, thank you: thank you to the workers, the priests and the volunteers! Thank you also because during the pandemic, the *Caritas* network intensified its

presence and alleviated the loneliness, suffering and needs of many. There are tens of thousands of volunteers, including many young people, including those engaged in civil service, who during this time have offered a listening ear and concrete responses to those in distress. It is precisely to young people that I would like attention to be paid. They are the most fragile victims of this time of change, but also the potential architects of an epoch change. They are the protagonists of the future. They are not the future, they are the present, but they are the protagonists of the future. Time dedicated to them is never wasted; so as to weave together, with friendship, enthusiasm and patience, relationships that overcome the cultures of indifference and appearance. "Likes" are not enough for us to live: we need fraternity, we need true joy. *Caritas* can be a training ground for life, helping many young people to discover the meaning of giving, to savour the good taste of rediscovering themselves by dedicating their time to others. In this way *Caritas* itself will remain young and creative, it will maintain a simple and direct gaze, fearlessly looking upwards and towards others, as children do. Do not forget the model of children: upwards and towards the other.

Dear friends, please remember these three paths and follow them with joy: *start from the least, keep the Gospel style, develop creativity*. I greet you with a phrase from the Apostle Paul, whom we shall celebrate in a few days' time: "The love of Christ controls us" (2 Cor 5:14). The love of Christ controls us. I wish you to allow yourselves to be controlled by this love: feel chosen for love every day, experience the merciful caress of the Lord that rests on you and take it to others. I accompany you in prayer and bless you; and I ask you to please pray for me. Thank you!
