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Message of the Holy Father Francis, signed by Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin, to the inaugural session of the Global Solutions Forum of the FAO on the elimination of child labour in agriculture

The following is the message sent by Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin on behalf of the Holy Father Francis to the inaugural session of the Global Solutions Forum of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation entitled “Acting Together to End Child Labour in Agriculture”:

Message of the Holy Father

To His Excellency Qu Dongyu

Director-General of FAO

Your Excellency,

At the behest and in the name of the Holy Father, I wish to thank the FAO for having promoted, in collaboration with the International Labour Organisation (OIL), this high-level world meeting which focuses our attention on an increasingly worrying phenomenon, given the recent estimates of international bodies.

In fact, even more so when it manifests itself as exploitation, child labour becomes a scourge that cruelly harms the dignified existence and harmonious development of the youngest children, considerably limiting their opportunities for the future, as it reduces and damages their lives to meet the productive and lucrative needs of adults.

The negative consequences of this tragedy have been exacerbated by the pandemic, which has led to a growing number of children dropping out of school and unfortunately falling into the clutches of this form of slavery. For many of our young brothers and sisters, not going to school means not only missing out on opportunities that will

enable them to meet the challenges of adulthood, but also falling ill, being deprived of their right to health, because of the deplorable conditions in which they have to carry out the tasks that are so vilely demanded of them.

If we consider the agricultural sector, the emergency is even more alarming: thousands of boys and girls are forced to work tirelessly, in extenuating, precarious and demeaning conditions, suffering mistreatment, abuse and discrimination. But the situation reaches its desolate extreme when it is the parents themselves who are forced to send their children to work, because without their active contribution they would not be able to support their families.

Mr. Director-General, let this meeting raise a forceful cry to demand that the competent international and national bodies defend the serenity and happiness of children! The most profitable investment that humanity can make is the protection of children! Protecting children means respecting the period of their growth, allowing these fragile shoots to benefit from the conditions appropriate to their opening and blossoming. Protecting children also means taking strong measures to help the families of small farmers so that they are not forced to send their children to the countryside to increase their income, which is so low that they cannot support their families with dignity. Finally, protecting children means acting in such a way that horizons are opened up for them as free, honest and caring citizens.

How important it would be for an appropriate and effective legal system, both international and national, to defend and protect children from this harmful technocratic mentality that has taken over the present. To this end, there must be more people and associations at all levels working to ensure that the desire for excessive profit that condemns children and young people to the brutal yoke of labour exploitation gives way to the logic of care. In this sense, we need to denounce, educate, raise awareness and convince those who have no qualms about enslaving children with unbearable burdens to see further and deeper, overcoming the selfishness and compulsive consumerism that end up devouring the planet, forgetting that its resources must be preserved for future generations.

Your Excellency, if we aspire to ensure that our society enjoys the dignity that ennobles it, if we want law to triumph over arbitrariness, we must ensure that our children and young people have a present free of labour exploitation. And this will only be possible if we make a concerted and resolute commitment to ensure that they pursue and cultivate their dreams, play, prepare and learn. Then the way will be opened to a bright future for the human family. I have no doubt that today's event and the current *International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour* will contribute to this.

In reiterating the desire of the Holy See and the commitment of the Catholic Church and her institutions to ensuring that the international community does not cease to fight in resolutely, jointly and decisively against the scourge of labour exploitation of children, I invoke upon you, Mr. Director General, and those who work to free children and young people from every adversity, the blessing of God Almighty.

Vatican City, 2 November 2021

*Cardinal Pietro Parolin
Secretary of State*