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Audience with the volunteers of the National Civil Protection Service

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, Pope Francis received in audience the volunteers of the National Civil Protection Service, to whom he addressed the following words:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

I thank the president for the words of greeting he addressed to me on behalf of all the national Civil Protection service. I know how commendable your work is and I like to recall how much good you did during the recent pandemic, especially in the most acute phases. You made yourselves available to help the most fragile families; you provided accompaniment and safety services for elderly and vulnerable people; you assisted many who were sick, poor or alone at home. You supported the vaccination campaign with competence and self-giving through voluntary work. Likewise, there has been no lack of commitment on your part for humanitarian assistance and the reception in Italy of refugees from Ukraine, especially women and children feeling from this absurd war. Thank you for what you have done and continue to do, in silence. Good deeds do not make noise, but they build up the world.

I would like to share with you three points for reflection and action, suggested by the word that inspires your service: *protection*. You have been placed to protect those people most exposed to dangers and fragility. This is a mission reminiscent of that of the Good Samaritan of the Gospel (cf. *Lk* 10: 29-37). You devote time, you take care and you offer skills and services. When this happens, society comes out better for it. The verb “to protect” indicates the care of brother for brother, a concrete fraternity, safeguarding life, preserving it, keeping watch over it. The “civil protection” you guarantee makes me think of these three aspects.

The first form of protection we need is that which preserves us from *social isolation*, to protect so as not to fall into social isolation. It is a very important way of giving voice to hope. Let us not forget that “the recent pandemic enabled us to recognize and appreciate once more all those around us who, in the midst of fear, responded by

putting their lives on the line. We began to realize that our lives are interwoven with and sustained by ordinary people valiantly shaping the decisive events of our shared history... They understood that no one is saved alone" (Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, 54).

In this description, we also find your commitment and your witness. Truly no one is saved alone. We need to understand and see that our life depends on that of others, and that goodness is contagious. Being close to our brothers makes us better, more available and supportive. And at the same time our society becomes a little more livable. To the extent that these attitudes grow and are connected in a style of supportive citizenship, then truly they can build a "civil protection". The emergencies of these years, linked to the reception of refugees fleeing from wars or climate change, remind us how important it is to encounter someone who extends a hand, who offers a smile, who dedicates time freely, who makes one feel at home. Every war marks a surrender of the human capacity to protect. A denial of what is written in the solemn commitments of the United Nations. This is why Saint Paul VI, speaking before the UN, proclaimed, "Never again war!" (4 October 1965). We repeat this today, in the face of what is happening in Ukraine, and we protect the dream of peace among people, the sacred right of peoples to peace.

The second protection to promote is that against *environmental disasters* – I met him in the land affected by earthquakes [probably referring to the president, Fabrizio Curcio]. I have often repeated an ancient Spanish saying: "God always forgives, men forgive sometimes, nature never forgives". The climate changes of our time have multiplied extreme atmospheric events, with dramatic consequences for civilian populations. The impact is catastrophic for people who lose their homes due to flooding of waterways, tornadoes and hydrogeological disruptions. The earth cries out! The earth cries out! When we force our hand, nature shows her cruel face and man is crushed, forced to cry out in fear. The Civil Protection has been fundamental also in the case of earthquakes, testifying to its vocation to protect those afflicted by such tragedies. Protection is a sign of care for the territory you inhabit: you keep watch in order to save human lives and to promote communities. We are called upon to protect the world, not to despoil it.

The third form of protection comes through *prevention*. "Everyone loves and cares for his or her native land and village, just as they love and care for their home and are personally responsible for its upkeep. The common good likewise requires that we protect and love our native land" (*Fratelli tutti*, 143). Prevention can be achieved by involving the various actors responsible for the administration of an area. It is necessary to form consciences so that common goods are not abandoned or benefit only the few. And to keep watch so that adverse events do not unleash irreparable disasters on the people. In a positive sense, it is important to educate in beauty, to safeguard life stories and traditions, cultures and social experiences. In doing this, you become artisans of hope, that virtue that "is bold; it can look beyond personal convenience, the petty securities and compensations which limit our horizon, and it can open us up to grand ideals that make life more beautiful and worthwhile" (*ibid.*, 55).

To protect is therefore to take care. We know how to do so with tenderness only if we recognize that we are cared for first. God is Father, he takes care of us and he does not let us lack his love. The prophet Isaiah recalls that God has drawn us "on the palms of his hands" (cf. *Is* 49: 16). He never abandons us: he always takes us by the hand and accompanies, protects and supports. A Psalm also recalls that "the Lord preserves the simple" (116: 6). If we feel that we are protected by him, we learn a generous protection towards our brothers and sisters, as many examples of saints teach us. And I would not like to finish without highlighting a word: volunteerism. You are volunteers. I have found three things in Italy I have not found elsewhere. One of them is the strong volunteerism of the Italian people, the strong vocation, the strong vocation to volunteer. It is a treasure; cherish it. It is a cultural treasure of yours, cherish it well.

Dear friends, I encourage you to continue your good work among those most in need, following the shining witness of your patron Saint Pio of Pietrelcina. I accompany you in prayer, and I bless all of you and your families. And I ask you, please, not to forget to pray for me.
