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Message of the Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development on the occasion of World Fisheries Day (21 November 2022)

The following is the message sent by the prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, His Eminence Cardinal Michael Czerny, S.J., on the occasion of World Fisheries Day, held today, 21 November 2022:

Message of His Eminence Cardinal Michael Czerny, S.J.

World Fisheries Day

21 November 2022

Message from the Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development

Each year, 21 November marks the celebration of World Fisheries Day and represents an opportunity to acknowledge, on the one hand, the enormous and sometimes underappreciated food source that the sea provides for millions of humans and, on the other, the role, professions and frequent hardships of all those involved in fishing and aquaculture.

In 2016, the FAO Committee on Fishing (COFI) endorsed a proposal for the Declaration of the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture, with the intent to increase awareness of these sub-sectors among governments and society at large and the need to sustain their development through specific policies and laws which allow them to develop and adopt sustainable fishing practices. In 2017, the 72nd Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed 2022 as the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA 2022), and it is in this context that we are celebrating World Fisheries Day today.

According to the FAO, in 2020 an estimated 58.5 million people were engaged (on a full-time, part-time, or occasional basis) in the primary sector of capture fisheries and aquaculture, providing the main source of income and livelihood for a substantial part of the population worldwide. Of all those engaged in primary production, the majority are in developing countries and most are small-scale, artisanal fishers and aquaculture workers. The highest numbers of workers are in Asia (85 percent), followed by Africa (9 percent), the Americas (4 percent), and Europe and Oceania (1 percent each).

As the most important single source of high-quality protein, fish is a vital source of food for millions of people. Small-scale artisanal fisheries, and aquaculture produce 40% of the worldwide fisheries catch, thus greatly contributing to food security, nutrition, and health.

Despite playing a crucial role for the well-being and the development of many communities around the world, however, the sector is plagued by several endemic problems that are threatening the development and meaningful life of fishing communities and, at times, the very existence of fisheries.

Several of these threats, such as climate change, loss of biodiversity and ocean acidification, are global issues affecting every country and ocean. “The socio-ecological crisis that we are living is a propitious moment for individual and collective conversion and for concrete decisions that can no longer be postponed”. Therefore, international cooperation in the light of “fairness, justice and equity” (Cardinal Pietro Parolin, *Address to the 27th Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC*, Sharm el-Sheikh, 8 November 2022) and of subsidiarity is essential for reducing the impact of these phenomena on our societies and to care for the oceans and their natural resources as a “common heritage of mankind”. Such international cooperation can even help in addressing localized and often traceable problems such as human rights infringements, poor and unsafe working conditions incompatible with human dignity, sea and river pollution (indeed, many fishing communities rely on a particular river or lake as a source of protein, but pollution threatens even freshwater), destruction of coastal areas (at times by new urban development), destructive and unsustainable fishing methods (for example bottom trawling, “factory” vessels, dynamite or cyanide), and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.

Furthermore, since early 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic has spread through the world causing exceptional health, social and economic damages that also harmed the fishing sector. Ports, fish markets and restaurants were closed, causing a significant reduction of the business of catching and selling fish products and consequently the loss of employment and income for many people, especially women who constitute a high proportion (albeit an often hidden one) of workers in this sector.

The economic impact of COVID-19 was strongly felt among small-scale fishers and in aquaculture workers since most of them operate without social protection plans or insurance, and are paid less than the legal minimum wage, often without a written contract, or are self-employed. Moreover, their business frequently requires sophisticated logistics (for food conservation and distribution), which was disrupted because of the lockdowns.

Governments throughout the world intervened to support those negatively affected by the pandemic, especially their most marginalized citizens. Regrettably, due to deficiencies within these exceptional governmental interventions, many people were left unaided and alone in coping with the crisis, though some were assisted by charitable organizations, including Catholic ones.

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that everything is connected and that we are in the same boat. It is necessary to join our efforts to create a new social conscience and innovative form of solidarity in which no one is left behind. Pope Francis invites us to “bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change. [...] All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents [...]”. Clearly, “if everything is related, then the health of a society’s institutions has consequences for the environment and the quality of human life”. We certainly need better and more proactive institutions and policies to support, promote and protect all those involved in the fishing sector as well as their families. Undoubtedly, “a great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us” (Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’*, Nos. 13, 14, 142 and 202) since major and complex improvements must be carefully implemented and coordinated.

On this World Fisheries Day, I would like to invite governments, international organizations, fisheries, faith-based organizations, and in a particular way Catholic institutions such as Stella Maris and Caritas, to join hands in effectively implementing the existing conventions and legislation and in cooperating to find innovative solutions for these inter-connected problems faced by the fishing world in an effort to protect “our common home”.

Card. Michael Czerny S.J.
Prefect
