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Press Conference to present the Holy Father Francis' Message for Lent 2023

At 11.30 this morning, a press conference was livestreamed from the Holy See Press Office, Saint Pius X Hall, Via dell'Ospedale 1, to present the Holy Father Francis' Message for Lent 2023 on the theme "Lenten Penance and the Synodal Journey".

The speakers were: His Eminence Cardinal Michael Czerny, S.J., prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development; the Reverend Don Walter Magnoni, head of the *Madonna di Lourdes* pastoral community in Lecco and lecturer in social ethics in the Faculty of Economics of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, and Dr. Sandra Sarti, president of *Aid for the Church in Need Italy*.

The following are their interventions:

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

We rarely connect Lent and beauty, but this is what Pope Francis invites us to do in the message that we present today. He draws attention to the mountain on which Jesus offers three of his disciples a very bright moment, which will have to sustain their journey. Here, there are two challenges to common sense.

First: that beauty comes from change, or rather from the effort to think again. In biblical language: from conversion.

Second: that beauty is a collective experience, intimate yes, but not private. In ecclesial language, it is a synodal experience. So, when we work on ourselves in Lent -- an asceticism -- we yearn for the light to increase, the joy to increase. We hope for light in change and collective joy.

It is customary for the Pope's Lenten message to contain a charitable element: that is, it directs the prayer and fasting of believers in the direction of an improvement of the world. Saint Paul VI said: in the direction of integral

human development. The Gospel image of the Transfiguration helps us this year to interpret this orientation in a more radical way.

We are distressed by dramatic events. The pandemic situation is still uncertain. The war in Ukraine does not seem to end and is only one among dozens of others, the one that reveals that the whole world is exposed to destruction. In addition, terribly destructive earthquakes remind us of all the natural catastrophes of a creation that seems to cry out, because it groans and suffers (cfr. Rm 8). A primitive idea of divinity would suggest sacrifices and penances to appease the forces that harm us. This is not the Lent of Christians, who rather confess Christ as the light of the world and are oriented to him.

At the end of the last century, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini chose the passage of the Transfiguration to respond to Dostoevsky's question: "What beauty will save the world?" And he observed: "In the disciples who climb the mountain, carrying in their hearts all the anxieties and burdens that agitate their personal and collective history, it is possible to read the questions that are in us about the meaning of time, the demand for meaning that comes from the anguish produced by violence and all tragedies."

In this year's message, Francis brings this observation even closer by employing what Saint Ignatius called the "composition of place", that is, the exercise of the imagination that makes us identify with the situation being described. The Pope writes: "During any strenuous mountain trek, we must keep our eyes firmly fixed on the path; yet the panorama that opens up at the end amazes

us and rewards us by its grandeur." Thus, we feel the surprise of the Transfiguration: "The divine beauty of this vision was incomparably superior to any effort that the disciples might have made in climbing Tabor."

Assuredly, this leads us to think of the labours of all who suffer and live their lives as an excessively harsh ascent. And we might ask ourselves if it is not our indifference that makes their journey harder. The Church wants to help remove obstacles and the burdens that hinder human development, life in abundance.

Another theme this year, which Pope Francis refers to explicitly, is the effort to be a synodal Church. Or rather the effort to become one: it is like a long climb. The Pope writes: "So too, the synodal process may often seem arduous, and at times we may become discouraged. Yet what awaits us at the end is undoubtedly something wondrous and amazing, which will help us to understand better God's will and our mission in the service of his kingdom."

We must therefore grasp that the change of mentality -- conversion -- and the communal nature of human life are blessed labours, on which depends "something wonderful and surprising" for this broken world. If we want a Lent of charity, if we believe that prayer and fasting have real effects on the world, we must broaden the idea of almsgiving to something larger, namely the biblical idea of restitution. Just as the synodal journey renews God's word among all the baptized and within the local Churches, so too must the lived Gospel restore joy and hope to all humanity. Joy and hope, *Gaudium et spes*: it is the movement of the Second Vatican Council, an uphill journey that Francis urges us not to abandon. The path is the mission. And the mission is charity, which calls into question an organization of the world and of the Church that may seem unchangeable, but is changeable, because it is the outcome of decisions, of freedom.

Conversion, joy, hope. The Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, starting today, will relaunch the contents of this message week after week. We wish to offer the Churches of the whole world our diverse and very practical assistance to embrace the Lenten proposal of Pope Francis and live their own Transfiguration.

Thank you!

Intervention of the Reverend Don Walter Magnoni

I read the Pope's Message for Lent and I imagined the times that Jesus climbed mountains, to pray in the silence of the night, to tell people who the blessed truly is, the happy man, and to be transfigured and to show in advance – to Peter, James and John – the glory of the Pasch.

I thought of how many times in my life I have taken the time to climb mountains, which I have always loved, in search of peace, to enjoy the beauty of creation, and to praise the God of life.

When I was still a boy, I think I was about thirteen or fourteen years old, it was precisely the experience of the mountain that made me say with conviction, for the first time: "But God exists then!"

I was raised in a family that had educated me in the Catholic faith ever since I was small, but over time many questions arose in me and I had doubts about God and his existence.

And so that day, while I walked in those mountains with my friends from the oratory, I had a sort of enlightenment. I was a boy without particular interests beyond football. But that vision was a beauty that conquered me. The mountains I had before me told me of an immensity, and their beauty reminded me of the creative hand of God.

The mountain since that day has always been a spiritual place, an experience of beauty that gives me energy and the desire to tell everyone how in the silence of the mountains it is easier to "feel God". The flowers and the rocks, the springs and the glaciers continue to enchant me.

The Pope writes: "During any strenuous mountain trek, we must keep our eyes firmly on the path; yet the panorama that opens up at the end amazes us and rewards us by its grandeur". I would like to echo these words and say how they truly interpret my feelings. I would add a detail: the mountain tells us also of our thirst for God. Even Jesus, on Calvary, experienced thirst. The mountain, especially when the ascent is arduous and on the hottest days, makes us thirsty and we do not always have enough water to satiate our faith. So, every time I think of our "thirst for God", and the words of José Tolentino Mendonça come to mind: "Faith does not resolve our thirst. It often intensifies it, brings it out into the open and, in certain circumstances, even makes it more dramatic. But faith helps us to see in thirst a form of journeying and prayer".

I like very much the connection the Pontiff makes between the Lenten journey and synodality. It is walking together as disciples of the one Master.

In this regard I would like to tell you about an initiative I promoted since, around a year and a half ago, I was called to be the parish priest for three parishes in the city of Lecco. I live in a magnificent area between the lake and the mountains. It is the land that inspired Alessandro Manzoni to write his famous novel, "The Betrothed".

When I arrived, I found myself faced with a community scarred by the experience of Covid. The most vulnerable were still not confident to come to Church. They all wore face masks and it was not easy to meet them. And yet I felt that in the air there was a strong need to stay together again. And so, I launched the "Sunday in the mountains" initiative, and I presented it as a proposal of synodality. Indeed, "synod" is etymologically a way of "walking together". Every month, after the Sunday Mass, we set out on foot for one of the many destinations we could reach. It was not necessary to register, it was enough to come to Mass ready for the walk. We do not use cars or other means to reach the mountains, also because we are truly at the foot of the mountains. Young and old walk together. When we reach our destination, we share lunch. It is good to see that there is always someone who offers something they have cooked to the others. The children always eat quickly and then play outdoors. The adults talk to each other. There are people who have just arrived in the parish who have the opportunity to get to know those who have always lived in that area. Then, before descending, we read together the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew Chapter 5, and every time someone tells why they love one of the beatitudes narrated by Jesus. The Lord's Prayer concludes this community moment.

I realize that it is something very simple, but I see how the people who participate feel that this "walking together"

also helps to take steps as a community.

The good thing is that even some people who are not from Lecco began to call to ask if they could join in and live these “Sundays in the mountains” with us. Walking, prayer and sharing food in simplicity favours the growth of bonds and shows the possibility of treading lightly the paths of life.

In *Laudato si'* the Pope writes: “Let us sing as we go! May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope” (LS 244).

Intervention of Dr. Sandra Sarti

I thank His Eminence Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, for his kind invitation to participate in this press conference for the presentation of Pope Francis' Message for Lent 2023.

The Gospel episode chosen by the Holy Father, and which constitutes the object of reflection, is that of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, the Holy Mount whose name is Gebel et-Tur, or the Mountain. The mountain, in ancient culture, was the place of the divine condition. I climbed that mountain years ago, under the guidance of my priest, together with my parish community, after a long period that had been extremely trying on a personal and family level, and in which my grief and helplessness had often mixed with anger. It was precisely on Tabor, “in the sidelines”, in silence, sitting among the leaves on a low branch of a tree, that I meditated on the meaning of this Gospel. And abandoning myself to prayer in that healing silence restored my light and hope. Climbing the mountain allowed me to feel the Lord's embrace and to let go of the anger within me. My soul then descended invigorated, purified and light, and even today, when it needs to, it ascends on the swift wings of memory and returns there, to Tabor, to find that silence which is a *conditio sine qua non* for seeking God and listening to Jesus speak to us.

But besides this very personal experience of mine, I am also here today in my capacity as president of the Italian Section of the Pontifical Foundation Aid to the Church in Need (ACS), an organization that has been at the side of persecuted Christians since 1947, and I wish to testify how the work we do in our institute goes hand in hand with the indication offered to us by the Supreme Pontiff to follow two paths to climb the mountain together with Jesus.

The first path is the one indicated by the Voice of God who bursts forth from the Cloud - symbolizing the Holy Spirit - saying: “This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!” This phrase, “listen to Him”, is the high road that is pointed out to us. Listen to Him, my Son, says the Father, and by this he means to indicate that all of us faithful must listen to Jesus and we must also listen to Him when He speaks of the Cross because suffering cannot but be part of the life of every man.

Pope Francis also affirms that the Lord “...speaks to us through our brothers and sisters, especially in the faces and the stories of those who are in need”. Well, this is not only the path that the Aid to the Church in Need community has been treading since its foundation but, indeed, it is its overriding goal: that of helping brothers and sisters in faith who are suffering.

For ACS, “the faces and stories of those who are in need” are also those of the approximately 416 million Christians living in the 26 nations of the world where persecution is still active. And they are also the voices of the 5.2 billion people in three quarters of the world who experience the denial of the fundamental right to religious freedom and suffer the consequences of its violation.

To deprive any believer of the possibility of manifesting his or her belief and the possibility of worship is to exercise violence on the soul and to violate one of the fundamental human rights.

The need for help of our brothers and sisters in faith, the suffering they undergo just because they are Christians, exists and painfully conditions their life. Many people risk their lives to participate in Mass; others cannot participate at all. Pope Francis has never failed to denounce this tragedy repeatedly. Therefore, Aid to the Church in Need carries out, thanks to fundraising, around five thousand projects annually in almost 140 nations, and utilizes resources to denounce the indifference that surrounds the tragedy of the violation of religious freedom. In these recent days, the faces and voices that cry for help and demand our most attentive listening are those emerging from the ruins of the devastating earthquake in Turkey and Syria.

The Holy Father has also indicated a second path to follow, that of not taking “refuge in a religiosity made up of extraordinary events and dramatic experiences, out of fear of facing reality and its daily struggles, its hardships and contradictions”.

The Gospel teaches us that one cannot hide away, but, listening to the Word of Jesus, it is necessary instead to embrace one’s own sufferings, as He does with the Cross, and to face the daily hardships also sustaining those of others, because the path shown to us is a common path, of closeness, solidarity and sharing.

ACS also proceeds in this direction, supported by the example of benefactors who give to help brothers and sisters they do not know and whom they will never meet, and at the same time, thanks to the sense of sharing, we manage to make Christians who are in need feel that closeness and that support that renews their hope and fuels their courage.

With all our personal and professional commitment, in the knowledge that “the Cross saves”, every day we renew our communion with our Church and we persevere in our attempt to put into practice the teaching by which the Holy Father invites us to walk those two paths, in which every step of ours must translate into Christian actions to be carried out together.

Thank you for your attention.
