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Address of the Holy Father Francis to the participants in the third edition of the States General on Natality

The following is the address delivered by the Holy Father Francis this morning in the Auditorium of Via della Conciliazione during the third edition of the States General on Natality:

Address of the Holy Father

Participants in the “States General on Natality”

Address of the Holy Father

Madam President of the Council of Ministers,

Dear friends, brothers, dear friend Gigi,

Excuse me for not standing to speak, but I cannot tolerate the pain when I am on my feet. I greet you all, and I thank you for your effort. Thank you to Gigi De Palo, president of the Foundation for Natality, for his words and for the invitation, because I believe that the theme of natality is central for everyone, especially for the future of Italy and of Europe. I would like to give just two “snapshots” that took place here in the [Saint Peter's] Square. Two weeks ago, my secretary was in the Square and a mother came with her pram. He, a gentle priest, and went over to bless the baby... it was a dog! Fifteen days ago, at the Wednesday General Audience, I went to greet people, and I arrived in front of a woman, about fifty years old; I greeted the woman, and she opened a bag and said: “Will you bless him, my baby”: a dog! I did not have any patience there and I yelled to the woman, “Madam, many children are hungry, and you are here with a dog!” Brothers and sisters, these are scenes from the present, but if things continue like this, it will be the custom of the future: beware.

Indeed, the birthrate is the primary indicator for measuring the hope of a people. If few are born, it means there

is little hope. And this has consequences not only from an economic and social point of view; it undermines confidence in the future. I have learned that last year, the Italian birthrate reached an all-time low: just 393 thousand newborns. It is a figure that reveals great concern for tomorrow. Today, to bring children into the world is perceived as an undertaking to be borne by families. And this, unfortunately, conditions the mentality of the young generations, who grow up in uncertainty, if not disillusionment and fear. They live in a social climate in which starting a family has been transformed into a titanic effort, instead of being a shared value that everyone recognizes and supports. Feeling alone and forced to count exclusively on one's own strengths is dangerous; it means slowly eroding communal life and resigning oneself to solitary existences, in which each person is left to their own devices, with the consequence that only the richest can afford, thanks to their resources, greater freedom in choosing what form to give their own lives. And this is unjust, as well as humiliating.

Perhaps never before as in this time, amid wars, pandemics, mass displacements and climate crises, does the future seem uncertain. Friends, it *is* uncertain; not only seems, it *is* uncertain. Everything goes fast and even acquired certainties pass quickly. In fact, the speed around us increases the fragility we carry within us. And in this context of uncertainty and fragility, the younger generations experience more than anyone else a *feeling of precariousness*, so that tomorrow seems like a mountain impossible to climb. The President of the Council of Ministers spoke of the "crisis", a key word. But let us remember two things about crises: we do not emerge from a crisis alone, either we all come out or we do not; and we do not emerge from a crisis the same: we come out better or worse. Let us remember this. This is the crisis of today. Difficulty in finding a stable job, difficulty in keeping a job, prohibitively expensive houses, skyrocketing rents and inadequate salaries are real problems. They are problems that challenge politics, because it is there for us all to see that the free market, without the necessary correctives, becomes unbridled and produces increasingly grave situations of inequality. Some years ago, I remember an anecdote about a queue outside a transport company, a queue of women seeking work. They told one of them that it was her turn, presenting the data... "All right, you will work eleven hours a day, and the salary will be six hundred euros. OK?" And she said, "But you can't live on six hundred euros ... eleven hours". "Madam, look at the queue, and choose. If you like it, take it; if you don't like it, go hungry. This is something of the reality we live. It is a culture that is unfriendly, even hostile, to the family, centred as it is on the needs of the individual, where individual rights are constantly claimed and the rights of the family are not mentioned (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, 44). In particular, there are almost insurmountable constraints on women. They, indeed, are those most damaged: young women often at the crossroads between career and maternity, or rather crushed by the burden of caring for their own families, often in the presence of frail elderly and dependent people. At the moment, women are slaves to this selective work rule, which also prevents them from motherhood.

Certainly, Providence exists, and millions of families attest to this with their life and their choices, but the heroism of many cannot become an excuse for everyone. Therefore, there is a need for farsighted policies. There is a need to prepare the ground for a new springtime to flourish, and to leave this demographic window behind. And, given that the ground is common, just as society and future are common to us all, it is necessary to face the problem *together*, without ideological barriers and preconceived stances. Togetherness is important. It is true that, also with your help, much has been done and I am grateful for this, but it is still not enough. A change of mentality is needed: the family is not part of the problem, but part of its solution. So, I ask myself: is there anyone who can look ahead with the courage to wager on families, on children, on young people? So many times, I hear the complaints of mothers: "Eh, my son graduated a long time ago... and he doesn't get married, he stays at home... what should I do?" - "Don't iron your shirts, ma'am, let's start like this, then we'll see".

We cannot accept that our society ceases to be generative and degenerates into sorrow. When there is no generativity, there is sorrow. It is an ugly, grey malaise. We cannot passively accept the fact that so many young people struggle to realize their dream of a family, and are forced to lower their aspirations, settling for private and mediocre substitutes: making money, aiming for a career, travelling, jealously guarding free time... All these things are good and right when they are part of a larger generative project, which gives life around and after oneself; if instead they remain only individual aspirations, they wither into selfishness and lead to that inner weariness. This is the state of mind of a non-generative society: inner weariness that anaesthetizes the great desires and characterizes our society as a society of weariness! Let us restore life to young peoples' desires for happiness! Yes, they have yearnings for happiness: let us breathe life into them again, let us open the way. Each one of us experiences the index of our own happiness: when we feel filled with something that generates

hope and warms the soul, it is spontaneous to share it with others. Conversely, when we are sad, grey, we become defensive, we close ourselves off and perceive everything as a threat. Here, birth rate, as well as welcome, which should never be opposed because they are two sides of the same coin, reveal to us how much happiness there is in society. A happy community naturally develops the desires to generate and to integrate, to welcome, while an unhappy society is reduced to a sum of individuals trying to defend what they have at all costs. And very often they forget to smile.

Friends, after sharing these concerns I carry in my heart, I would like to leave you with a word that is very dear to me: *hope*. The challenge of the birth rate is a question of hope. But beware, hope is not, as is often thought, optimism: it is not a vague positive feeling about the future. “Ah, you are a positive man, a positive woman, good!” No, hope is something else. It is not an illusion or an emotion that you feel, no: it is a concrete virtue, an attitude towards life. And it is associated with practical choices. Hope is fed by each person's commitment to the good; it grows when we feel we are participating and involved in giving meaning to our own lives and the lives of others. Nurturing hope is therefore social, intellectual, artistic, political action in the highest sense of the word; it is putting one's skills and resources at the service of the common good, it is *sowing the future*. Hope generates change and improves the future. It is the smallest of virtues, said Peguy, it is the smallest, but it is the one that takes you the furthest! And hope does not disappoint. There are so many *Turandots* in life today who say: “Hope is always dashed”. The Bible tells us: “Hope does not disappoint” (cf. *Rom 5:5*).

I like to think of the “States General of Natality” – now at their third edition – as a construction site for hope. A building site where one does not work on commission, because someone pays, but where we all work together precisely because everyone wants to hope. And so I hope that this edition may be an occasion to “extend the worksite”, to create, at several levels, a broad *alliance of hope*. Here it is good to see the worlds of politics, business, banking, sport, entertainment and journalism come together to think about how to move from winter to a demographic springtime. On how to start to be born again, not only physically, but inwardly, to come into the light every day and to illuminate tomorrow with hope. Brothers and sisters, let us not resign ourselves to greyness and barren pessimism, to the smile of compromise, no. Let us not believe that history is already marked, that nothing can be done to invert the trend. Because – allow me to say this in the language I prefer, that of the Bible – it is precisely in the most arid deserts that God opens up new roads (cf. *Is 43:19*). Let us look for these new roads together in this arid desert!

Indeed, hope impels us to set out to find solutions that will shape a society that is commensurate to the historical moment we are living, a time of crisis beset by so many injustices. The war is one of these. Reviving the birth rate means remedying a form of social exclusion that is affecting the young and their future. And it is a service to all: children are not individual assets: they are people who contribute to the growth of all, bringing human and generational wealth. They also bring creativity to the hearts of parents. To you, who are here to find good solutions, the fruit of your professionalism and your skills, I would like to say: feel you are called to the great task of regenerating hope, of launching processes that will give impetus and life to Italy, to Europe, to the world, that will bring us many children. Thank you.
