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Press Conference “Laudate Deum: voices and testimonies on the climate crisis”

At 10.00 this morning, in Largo della Radio, adjacent to the Palazzina Leo XIII in the Vatican, a press conference was held, reserved to accredited journalists, entitled “*Laudate Deum: voices and testimonies on the climate crisis*”.

The speakers were: Giorgio Leonardo Renato Parisi, Nobel Laureate in Physics 2021; Vandana Shiva, scientist, activist and environmentalist (by remote link); Carlo Petrini, gastronomist, sociologist and activist (by remote link); Jonathan Safran Foer, writer; Luisa-Marie Neubauer, leader of “Fridays for Future” in Germany; Benoit Halgand, co-founder of the French youth organizations “Réveil Ecologique” and “Lutte et Contemplation”; Jubran Ali Mohammed Ali, young man from Libya; Ridhima Pandey, protagonist of the film “The Letter: A Message for our Earth” on *Laudato si’* (by remote link); Alessandra Sarmentino, animator of the Progetto Policoro of the archdiocese of Palermo, animator of the Movimento *Laudato si’* and associate of Catholic Action; and Yann Arthus-Bertrand, photographer, director and UN Environmental Goodwill Ambassador (video contribution).

The following are the interventions by Luisa-Marie Neubauer, Benoit Halgand, Jubran Ali Mohammed Ali and Alessandra Sarmentino:

Intervention by Luisa-Marie Neubauer

My name is Luisa Neubauer, I am a youth climate activist from Germany. I grew up in one of the most privileged places on earth, in Hamburg in Germany. And just as my parents took care of me, I thought our governments would take care of the big problems in the world.

I grew up in a world that told me that everything would work out, that if the economy grew, step by step everyone in the world would prosper. Today I call it a fairy tale. Eventually, I found out about the fairy tale. And once I did, I started acting, and luckily, I wasn’t alone. We were thousands, we were hundreds of thousands and then millions, Friday after Friday. And for a brief moment in 2019, it seemed that things would work out. And now here we are, in 2023 witnessing how childhoods are flooded and burned.

What scares me though, isn't the crisis alone. What scares me is our leaders' way of responding to the crisis. Pope Francis is right in his deep worry. Some speak of governmental inaction. I do not think that is true. Governments everywhere are acting. In recent years, the vast majority of them have turned around and started doing everything they can to please fossil fuel interests and prevent real change.

Laudate Deum points out just how detrimental the current path is. While sugarcoating themselves in corporate greenwashing, fossil fuel industries still plan to expand. In East Africa, the French oil giant is still planning to construct the EACOP Pipeline, the longest crude oil pipeline worldwide - all that, while the science says clearly: Any new fossil fuel projects endangers our planetary safety limit. Laudate Deum calls it "suicidal".

And our governments? Instead of holding those accountable, who are continuing to burn fossil fuels, governments around the globe have started criminalizing those defending land and life. They have started portraying us - as it says in Laudate Deum - as "radicalized". And it shows: Just last week we found that in Vietnam, our friend and climate activist Hong has been charged with three years in prison, for nothing but peaceful organizing.

I used to be scared of the climate crisis. What scares me now, is how we as climate activists are supposed to keep going in the escalating climate of repression and criminalization. We see a multilateral crisis of trust emerging, as the so-called global north and the emerging economies fail to deliver on both climate and funding. The host of the upcoming UN climate conference, plans to allow democratic spaces to be suffocated by the oil industry.

Laudate Deum speaks of what I would name a crisis of culture, of humanity having failed to establish a profound relationship to our natural cradle. If we know what will be lost but we do not name what is yet for us to win and to explore, it is no wonder we lose people in denial.

And there is one more crisis, that I would add. It is the crisis of hope. It's the despair crawling under empty promises. It is the hopelessness that emerging where privileged cynics tell us it is "too late". People like to tell us activists that "we give them so much hope" and I wonder. Do you ever ask yourselves, who provides hope for us?

I used to be scared of failing in the climate crisis, now I am scared people won't even try. And yet - there is a silver lining. Laudate Deum puts it out there.

1. At all costs, civil society and climate activists must be protected.
2. The upcoming climate conference must prove its willingness to deliver, to become a global and just break-up with our fossil fuel ties.

And I would, as a youth activist, add one further call to action: We need institutions, leaders, people of all ages, we need you to become activists. We need you not to no longer wait for hope, but become it. Pope Francis has shown how this is done.

And if the pope, with all it takes in such an institution like the Catholic Church, managed to call for a collective, cultural and spiritual revolution - I am very sure it is not too much to ask for everyone else. this is also a call for the Catholic Church, to become a true ally for those fighting the front lines, and fully divesting all assets from fossil fuels.

It is okay to be scared. I just shouldn't stop anyone from doing what this time is asking us for. So that at some point, we will not have to tell fairy tales to our children anymore. But can tell the story of how we became the world we want them to inherit.

Intervention by Benoit Halgand

Hello everyone,

It's a great pleasure for me to be here with you and to be able to react to Pope Francis' inspiring words on the climate crisis. As a brief introduction, I'm a 25 years old catholic engineer and I've been involved in the climate movement in France for several years. I'm speaking on behalf of several hundred Christians, gathered within the "Lutte et Contemplation" collective. This collective, translated as "Struggle and Contemplation", wishes to combine a life of prayer and collective action in the face of ecological challenges.

Like others from my generation, I'm acutely aware of the climate peril we're facing. It's distressing to know that we live in a world where mankind is on the verge of destroying its very conditions of existence. But it's even worse to hear all the skeptical, relativistic and techno-solutionist rhetoric. In this context, we are so grateful for Pope Francis' clear-sighted and firm reminder of the urgency of climate and social issues.

I would like to pick up on three points made in the apostolic exhortation that strike me as particularly prophetic.

Firstly, I greatly appreciate the way Pope Francis insists on the need for a strong civil society and a political response to the ecological crisis. The focus on small individual action is a delaying tactic used by powers in place to avoid more structural changes. As a graduate from Polytechnique, I've often faced this irresponsible rhetoric by the so-called elites of the business world. But like others, I chose to depart from the prestigious career path that was offered to me. I could not work for an ecocidal company driven by short-term profit. I have decided to get a part-time job, within an association that provides training for the ecological transition, and to devote the rest of my time to voluntary commitments in the Church and the civil society.

Faced with a power that corrupts us, faced with international institutions too often driven by financial indicators, faced with technology that enslaves and isolates us, I'd like to repeat the question Pope Francis' asks all christians : "What is the ultimate meaning of [our] work and [our] efforts?"

I'd also like to emphasize the urgency, well spelled out by the Pope, of moving away from fossil fuels. Coal is a 20th century energy. There is no such thing as green oil, and gas is not a transitional energy. We now have to fight against every new fossil fuel project. At a time when many of us are mobilizing against TotalEnergies' deadly project EACOP in Uganda and Tanzania, the Pope's words resonate deeply with us. We strongly felt his denunciation of marketing and communication strategies that misleads local populations. Such projects will only lead to greater inequalities and environmental damages.

Finally, I'd like to stress that our mobilization does not only stem from a sense of moral duty or fear for the future, but mainly from a place of love and our faith in a merciful God. Today, technology enslaves our souls, the advertising system corrupts our minds and the idolatry of the market alienates us from God. As pointed out in *Laudate Deum*, we cannot hope to serenely grow in our relationship with Christ, with our brothers and sisters, and with Creation, if we continue to suffer the consumerist injunctions of the economic system. It is to follow Christ and to love more that we wish to fight.

However, our struggle is in vain if we don't allow ourselves to be deeply reconciled and renewed by Christ. The evil we are fighting against is not external to us, or to our Churches; each of us is familiar with desires of domination and possession that weaken our capacity to be righteous. We need to take the time to contemplate, to stop regularly and to foster our relationship with God.

At a time when the Church is undergoing a form of collapse in our secularized Western countries, proclaiming and living the Gospel today requires an embodied response to the challenges of our time. It is rooted in Christ, at the side of the poorest, and as a community, that we must mobilize. Confident that the Holy Spirit precedes us in

our struggles for social and climate justice, let us ask him for the boldness to move forward joyfully.

Intervention by Jubran Ali Mohammed Ali

My name is Ali, I am 28 years old, and I was born in Libya, in Tripoli; I arrived in Italy in 2020.

In my country I studied economics, then when the war began in 2011 I stopped studying and I began to work as a bricklayer.

In Italy I continued studying; I am attending a course on intercultural mediation.

In Libya there have been so many wars that I thought I should flee to find peace and a future.

In Libya many people have weapons, and this is a danger to peace.

This year, Cyclone Daniel reached Libya. We have never seen such strong rain; the entire city of Derna was flooded. More than eleven thousand people died, and more than thirty thousand lost their homes. In a short time, the water destroyed the life of many people, and no-one had time to escape.

This happened not only because the climate has change, but also because the houses were built beneath a dam that has never been checked or maintained.

I would like to tell you something beautiful in the midst of so much suffering. There is a house in Derna that was not destroyed by the cyclone. All the nearby houses were swept away, but this one resisted. In that house, twelve children lived, who had lost their parents during the war but afterwards found a new home and a new family there. That house remained standing. It is a miracle!

I hope that my country will change, because I know that many people from the West, including my relatives, have gone to help the people of the East, and so the country has been united; it has left behind the divisions and the pain of the past.

I also hope that all men learn to respect nature, and to defend our common home, the earth. I want to thank Pope Francis, who always has words of affection for us migrants and refugees.

Thank you.

Intervention by Alessandra Sarmentino

Good morning, everyone,

Thank you for your generous invitation. For me it is a reason for pride but also a great responsibility.

I would like to begin this speech by trying to construct some images with you. Think of the majesty of Palermo Cathedral, the cathedral of Monreale or Cefalù; visualize the Valley of the Temples and the power of Mount Etna; think of the Park of the Madonie or Syracuse with its Greek theatre.

Now picture all these architectural and scenic wonders invaded by flames; try to hear the cry of the earth.

July 2023: the whole of Sicily was burning. Highways unpassable, airports closed, entire villages isolated. An elderly couple was found, once the fire was out, charred in their home; the Church of *Santa Maria di Gesù* in Palermo was destroyed. The fire hit not only the church building but also the adjacent monumental cemetery and the convent of Saint Benedict the Moor.

No escape route. An entire region trapped inside itself because of the fire set at the same time and in several places by nefarious arsonists.

The problem is that this human *modus operandi* has obvious repercussions on the climate and the environment. Fires destroy, as a direct consequence, all life forms of flora and fauna; they cause the soil to overheat, triggering chemical and biological reactions that affect its fertility. Desertification advances, the earth is no longer able to host life.

Landslides and floods followed as indirect consequences.

September 2023: Sicily continued to burn. Again, highways closed, airports unreachable. Basically, the same story repeats itself.

A woman died in the process of saving her horse; a man passed away due to a sudden illness while fleeing from his house devoured by flames.

I wonder and ask you: who will ever repay the hearts of the victims' families for this tormented humanity?

In this regard, I like to quote the words of Archbishop Corrado Lorefice of Palermo: *"(...) what happened is the ultimate outcome of decades of decisions, choices, gestures and omissions. The responsibility for this disaster certainly falls on those who have been in charge of public affairs; on our educational failings, as well as on the way of proclaiming the Gospel in our Christian communities. It falls on us, on us as a people"*.

I would like to convey to you the pain I feel in recounting these events. It is the same as a month ago, when we were doing our best to celebrate the Season of Creation; meanwhile I was reeling.

I wondered if it was worth it. I can forewarn you, almost with absolute certainty, that the next time the sirocco wind blows and the next time the temperature reaches 40 degrees, Sicily will burn again.

And the damage will be unparalleled. This time too.

In terms of lives lost, hectares of woods burnt, vegetation lost. Of economic damage, that too.

And of poor image.

Do you know what the biggest problem in this sad story is? Habit.

We have become accustomed to this scenario of death, but it only scares us when it is close to our homes.

And so, just when I felt I was getting used to it, I forced myself to talk, everywhere and to everyone, about the need to save our homes.

We should do it in the family, in schools, in recreation centres, in oratories. We should learn to plant flowers where they have tried to trample them down.

Active citizenship (a theme very dear to me thanks to my years in Catholic Action, my mandate as animator of

the *Policoro* Project and my presence in the *Laudato Si* Movement) means being here and now, in the present to build a better future.

Each person with his or her own abilities and skills.

To that cry for help from our land, to the possible desertification of Sicily, therefore, we must respond with life that re-births and nature that re-creates, even in the saddest moments.

The message that Pope Francis launches in *Laudato Si* is beautiful: humanity still has the capacity to work together to build our common home.

To collaborate, to work – with others, for others.

This is, in my opinion, the deepest meaning of today's experience. This house of ours needs the help of everyone, the farmer, the teacher, the housewife, the entrepreneur.

We are all called to care.

It is called love, which is none other than staying together even and above all in adversity. It means saying “you can count on me even when you falter”, or, as in this story, “even when you are burning”. I will conclude with a question: are we truly doing everything in our power?

Thank you for your attention.
