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Address of the Holy Father to participants in the General States of Natality

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

Address of the Holy Father

Distinguished Authorities,

Representatives of civil society,

dear brothers and sisters, dear young people and children, good morning!

It is good to applaud when someone says “good morning”, because very often we do not greet each other. It is good, the applause to “good morning”. And thank you to Gianluigi and those who are working for this initiative. I am pleased to be with you again because, as you know, the theme of natality is very close to my heart. Indeed, every gift of a child reminds us that God has confidence in humanity, as the motto “*Being there, more youth, more future*” highlights. Our “being there” is not the result of chance: God wanted us, He has a grand and unique plan for each one of us, no-one excluded. From this perspective, it is important to meet, to work together to promote natality with *realism, foresight, and courage*. And I would like to reflect a little on these three key words.

First: *realism*. In the past, there was no lack of studies and theories warning about the number of inhabitants on earth, because the birth of too many children would have created economic imbalances, a lack of resources, and pollution. I was always struck by how these theses, now long outdated, spoke of *human beings* as if they were *problems*. But human life *is not a problem, it is a gift*. And at the root of pollution and starvation in the world are not children being born, but the choices of those who think only of themselves, the delirium of an unbridled, blind and rampant materialism, of a consumerism that, like an evil virus, undermines the existence of people and society at the root. The problem is not *how many of us there are in the world*, but *the world that we are building* – this is the problem; not children, but selfishness, which creates injustice and structures of sin, to the point of

weaving unhealthy interdependencies between social, economic and political systems.[1] Selfishness makes us deaf to the voice of God, who loves first and teaches how to love, and to the voice of our brothers and sisters beside us; it anaesthetizes the heart, it makes us live through objects, no longer understanding why; it induces us to have many goods, while no longer knowing how to do good. And houses fill up with objects and are emptied of children, becoming very sad places (cf. *Homily of the Mass for the Congolese community*, 1 December 2019). There is no shortage of dogs and cats... These are not lacking. There is a shortage of children. The problem of our world is not the children who are born: it is selfishness, consumerism and individualism, which make people satiated, lonely and unhappy.

The birth rate is the first indicator of the hope of a people. Without children and young people, a country loses its desire for the future. In Italy, for example, the average age is currently forty-seven years. And there are countries in central Europe with an average age of 24 years. Forty-seven years, and new negative records continue to be reached. Unfortunately, if we were to take these data as a base, we would be forced to say that Italy is progressively losing its hope in tomorrow, like the rest of Europe: the *Old Continent* is increasingly turning into the *continent of the old*, a tired and resigned continent, so caught up in exorcising loneliness and anguish that it no longer knows how to savour, in the *civilization of giving*, the *true beauty of life*.

Despite many words and much commitment, we are not managing to turn the tide. Why? Why are we unable to stem this haemorrhage of life?

And there is a fact that a scholar of demography told me. At the moment, the most income-generating investments are weapons manufacturing and contraceptives. One destroys life; the other prevents life. And these are the most profitable investments. What future can we expect? It is bad. The matter is complex, but this cannot and must not become an alibi for not addressing it. There is a need for *foresight*, which is the second key word. At institutional level, there is a need for *effective policies*, for *courageous, concrete and long-term choices*, to sow today so that children can reap tomorrow. There is a need for greater commitment on the part of all governments, in order for the young generations to be put in the condition to realize their legitimate dreams. These means implementing *serious and effective choices in favour of the family*. For example, to put a mother in a position where she does not have to choose between work and childcare; or to free many young couples from the burden of job insecurity and the impossibility of buying a house.

Then, it is important to promote, at social level, a *culture of generosity and intergenerational solidarity*, to review habits and lifestyles, renouncing what is superfluous in order to give the youngest a hope for tomorrow, as is the case in many families. Let us not forget: the future of children and grandchildren is built also on the aching backs of years of toil and hidden sacrifices by parents and grandparents, in whose embrace there is the silent and discreet gift of an entire life's work. And on the other hand, the recognition and gratitude towards them from those who grow up is the healthy response that, like water combined with cement, makes society solid and strong. These are the values to uphold, this is the culture to spread, if we want to have a tomorrow.

Third word: *courage*. And here I address the young in particular. I know that for many of you the future can seem daunting, and that amidst the declining birth rate, wars, pandemics and climate change, it is not easy to keep hope alive. But do not give up, because tomorrow is not something ineluctable: we build it together, and in this "together" first of all we find the Lord. It is He who, in the Gospel, teaches us that "But I say to you": very often the Lord says "But I say to you", which changes things (cf. *Mt 5:38-48*), a "but" that has the perfume of salvation, that prepares something "out of the blue", that prepares a rupture. Let us make this "but" ours, all of us, here and now. Let us not resign ourselves to a script that has already been written by others: let us row to reverse the course, even if it means going against the tide! As do the mothers and fathers of the Foundation for Natality, who every year organize this event, this "building site of hope" that helps us think, and which is growing, increasingly involving the world of politics, business, banks, sport, entertainment, and journalism.

But the future is built not only by having children. Another very important part is missing: grandparents. Today there is a culture of hiding grandparents away, sending them to rest homes. Now things have changed a bit because of retirement – unfortunately it has – but that is the tendency: to discard grandparents. An interesting story comes to my mind. There was a nice family, where the grandfather lived with them. But over time the

grandfather aged, and when he ate, he got dirty... And the father had a small table made for the kitchen so that the grandfather could eat there, and so they could invite people over. One day, he came home and found one of the small children working with some wood. "What are you making?" "A table, daddy". "But why?" "For you, when you will be old". Please, do not forget grandparents. When I used to visit a lot of rest homes, in the other diocese, I used to ask the grandparents – I am thinking of one case: "How many children do you have?" "Many". "Ah, good. And do they come to visit you?" "Yes, they come all the time". As I was leaving, the nurse said to me: "They never come". Lonely grandparents. Rejected grandparents. This is cultural suicide. The future is made by the young and the elderly, together: courage and memory, together. Please, when speaking about natality, which is the future, let us also talk about grandparents, who are not the past: they help the future. Please, have children, lots of them, but also take care of grandparents. It is very important.

Dear friends, thank you for what you do, thank you all. Thank you for your courage. I am close to you, and I accompany you with my prayer. Please, I ask you, do not forget to pray for me. But pray for me, not against! Thank you.

And this "for and not against", I say it because once I was finishing an audience over there. Twenty metres away, where the barrier was, there was a lady, an old lady, tiny, beautiful eyes. She began to say, "Come, come". She was nice. I went over to her: "Madam, what is your name?". She told me her name. "And how old are you?" "Eighty-seven". "But what do you do? What do you eat to stay so strong?" "I eat ravioli, I make them myself". And she gave me the recipe for the ravioli. And then I said to her, "Madam, please, pray for me". "I do it every day". And, jokingly, I said to her, "But pray for me, not against!" And the little old lady, smiling, said to me, "Be careful, Father. They pray against you in there". Clever, eh! A bit anticlerical.

And please: for, not against. For.

[1] Cf. St. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987), 36-37; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1869.
