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Message of the Holy Father on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the creation of the John Paul II Foundation for the Sahel

The following is the message sent by the Holy Father Francis to His Eminence Cardinal Michael Czerny on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the creation of the John Paul II Foundation for the Sahel:

Message

His Eminence
Cardinal Michael CZERNY
President of the John Paul II Foundation for the Sahel

I send my greetings to the Diplomatic Corps present, to the representatives of international and national institutions, and to all the participants in the commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the creation of the John Paul II Foundation for the Sahel.

This high-level dialogue, which focuses on the theme of desertification, gives me the opportunity to remember its Holy Founder, through the solemn appeal he made to the whole world in favour of this part of Africa, on 10 May 1980 in Ouagadougou. It was a pleading and solicitous voice that still resounds today for the poor and vulnerable people of the Sahel. “The voice of the fathers and mothers who have seen their children die without understanding, or who will always see in their children the after-effects of the hunger and thirst they have endured; the voice of future generations who must no longer live under this terrible threat to their lives’ (*Homily in Ouagadougou*, 10 May 1980). It was the voice of the voiceless, the voice of the innocents who have died because they lacked bread and water.

This is how the John Paul II Foundation for the Sahel was created and set up by the Holy Father, so that his Appeal would remain an effective sign of the Church’s love for her sons and daughters in West Africa. The Holy See follows the Foundation with particular interest through the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, aware that its activities contribute to improving the humanitarian and social situation of the

Sahelian populations.

As my predecessor wisely pointed out, external deserts can be a reflection of internal deserts, and “the way humanity treats the environment influences the way in which it treats itself, and vice versa” (Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in veritate*, no. 51).

Our action of solidarity and responsibility stems from our faith in God the Creator and in love for our neighbour (cf. *Mt 22*, 37-40).

Caring for the common home and caring for each person, created in the image and semblance of God, are therefore attitudes that go hand in hand. They stem from charity and bear witness to the love of Christ, the living sign of charity.

Every encounter with a person or people in a situation of poverty or vulnerability provokes us and raises questions. How can we help to eliminate, or at least alleviate, their marginalization and suffering? The people of God must be in the front line, always and everywhere, to respond to the silent cry of the countless poor throughout the world, particularly in the Sahel, to give them a voice, to defend them and to show solidarity with them in the face of so much hypocrisy and so many broken promises. (cf. *Message for the Fourth World Day of the Poor*, 15 November 2020).

Some countries in this region of West Africa are still going through crises that are increasingly threatening peace, stability, security and development. These phenomena, linked to terrorism, economic insecurity, climate change and intercommunity struggles, are exacerbating the vulnerability of states and the poverty of their citizens, resulting in the migration of young people. This context makes the Foundation’s task ever more difficult, but ever more essential.

On this day of commemoration, echoing the heartfelt cries of Pope Saint John Paul II, I reiterate today his appeal to all people of goodwill throughout the world: work for security, justice and peace in the Sahel! Peace enables integral human development, which is built day by day in the search for the order willed by God, and it can only flourish when everyone recognizes their responsibility in promoting it (cf. Paul VI, *Message for the World Day of Peace*, 1 January 1974). I appeal to all those involved, in Africa and in the rest of the world, especially political and economic decision-makers. Their responsibility is paramount.

It is no longer time to wait, we must act! No one can deny the fundamental right of every human being to live in dignity and to fulfil his or her potential. “If each individual is of such great worth, it must be stated clearly and firmly that the mere fact that some people are born in places with fewer resources or less development does not justify the fact that they are living with less dignity”. “It is an ... indispensable act of love to strive to organize and structure society so that one’s neighbour will not find himself in poverty. It is an act of charity to assist someone who is suffering, but it is also an act of charity, even if we do not know the person, to work to change the social conditions that caused his or her suffering” (Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, nos. 106, 186).

I hope that this commemoration of the creation of the John Paul II Foundation for the Sahel will enable us to identify, promote and implement, with determination, all the initiatives needed to build justice and peace for the integral and sustainable human development of all the peoples of the Sahel. I give you my blessing. And please, do not forget to pray for me.

From the Basilica of Saint John Lateran, 7 May 2024

FRANCIS