Press Conference

June 14, 2021

Press Conference for the Presentation of the *Message* of Pope Francis for the Fifth *World Day of the Poor*

Holy See Press Office, June 14, 2021

"*The poor you will always have with you*" (*Mark* 14:7). These words of Jesus, pronounced a few days before the events of his passion, death and resurrection, are an effective synthesis of our Lord's stance regarding the poor. In the face of the disciples, scandalized that a woman should waste a large sum of money by pouring the perfume from the alabaster jar on Jesus' head, He affirms that the first poor person on whom we must focus is precisely himself. The Son of God not only asks to be recognized as representing all the poor, but he identifies as the poorest of the poor. "The face of God that He reveals, in fact, is that of a Father for the poor and close to the poor" (*Message*, 2).

The motto chosen by Pope Francis for the fifth *World Day of the Poor* urges believers to keep their gaze fixed on Jesus in order to discover that in him and in his words we find not only the true meaning of poverty, but above all the capacity to recognize the poor. His *Message* reveals a profoundly Christological vision as it considers current issues in order that the Church may prepare to live the *World Day of the Poor* with an awareness proper to those who know that we have before us one of the central themes of the Gospel.

The Pope uses this image from the New Testament to highlight a path which not only the Church is called to follow in this period of history, still marked by forms of injustice which become

all the more evident as new forms of poverty emerge. Once again he refers to the pandemic which “continues to knock on the doors of millions of people and, when it does not bring with it suffering and death, is nonetheless a harbinger of poverty” (*Message*, 5). The Holy Father is well aware of the consequences which are daily before our eyes, to the point that "those most vulnerable find themselves deprived of basic necessities. The long lines in front of soup kitchens are a tangible sign of this deterioration" (*Message*, 5).

In this time of severe pandemic, Pope Francis highlights the example of Father Damien (1840-1889), the Belgian priest canonized by Benedict XVI on October 11, 2009, who, driven by great missionary zeal, became an apostle to those infected with leprosy. He shared everything with them, heedless of the consequences. In the "colony of death", as the huge leper colony on the remote island of Molokai was known, cut off from the world, this young evangelizer brought joy and hope. His was not the improvised work of an irresponsible risk-taker; on the contrary, his actions highlighted the deliberate decision of a believer who understood the meaning of the Gospel. Pope Francis calls to mind the witness of this saint in confirmation of so many men and women, including hundreds of priests, who in this Covid-19 drama have been willing to share totally in the suffering of millions of infected people.

The strong words with which the Pope calls us to face up to our responsibilities directly, instead of foisting them on others, are thus particularly effective. In the face of the poor, we cannot allow ourselves any “habit that becomes indifference"; rather, it is necessary and urgent that we become engaged in “a mutual sharing of life that does not allow for proxies. The poor are not people “apart” from the community, but brothers and sisters with whom to share suffering, in order to alleviate their discomfort and marginalization” (*Message*, 3).

The *Message's* reference to the condition of women deserves particular attention. In the face of daily episodes of violence against women, we cannot fail to condemn this savagery, which makes the world of women a theater of true poverty. In an even more inexplicable way for a culture that has reached the most mature forms of equality, we are forced to see expressions of inequality and lack of dignity that hurt not only its poor victims, but also society as a whole, often too helpless and voiceless, as resigned to relinquishing the conquests achieved laboriously over decades. It will not be superflous, therefore, to pause and reflect on what Pope Francis writes when commenting on the Gospel scene from which he derived the motto this *World Day of the Poor:* “This anonymous woman, destined perhaps for this reason to represent the entire female population that in the course of the centuries will have no voice and will suffer violence, inaugurates the important presence of women who take part in the culminating moments of Christ's life ...Women, so often discriminated against and kept away from positions of responsibility, in the pages of the Gospels are instead protagonists in the history of revelation” (*Message*, 1).

This *Message* highlights once again the constant teaching of Pope Francis that “the entire work of Jesus affirms that poverty is not the result of fate, but a concrete sign of His presence among us” (*Message*, 2). The clear conclusion is that Christians need to regain the enthusiasm necessary in order to make their presence in the world credible once more. If we intend to remain faithful to the Gospel, then it is evident that God is not found in the times and places where we decide to meet Him, but where He wants to reveal himself and be recognized: “in the lives of the poor, in their suffering and indigence, in the sometimes inhuman conditions in which they are forced to live” (*Message*, 2). The quotation from Origen in the footnotes to the *Message's* introduction makes it clear how much Pope Francis intends to express himself with *parresia* on this issue: “those who do not recognize the poor betray Jesus' teaching and cannot be his disciples. We recall, in this regard, the strong words of Origen: "Judas seemed to be concerned about the poor [...]. If now there is still someone who holds the purse of the Church and speaks in favor of the poor like Judas, but then takes what is put in, then let them have their share along with Judas” (*Message*, 1). Here is an invitation to true conversion which consists in a “change of mentality” so as not to entrust one's life to a fragmentary outlook, but

to lay it open to welcoming the grace that transforms and enlivens because it points in the direction of what is essential (cf. n. 4).

Pope Francis' teaching, as usual when he speaks of the poor, does not indulge in rhetoric, but goes straight to what needs to be addressed urgently. The *Message* highlights the need to seek out the causes of poverty in order to identify the steps necessary to its alleviation. Concerning the former aspect, the Pope is forceful and to the point: “The idea seems to be gaining ground that the poor are not only responsible for their condition, but that they constitute an intolerable burden for an economic system that focuses on the interests of a few privileged groups. A market that ignores or selects ethical principles creates inhumane conditions that affect people who already live in precarious conditions” (*Message*, 5). In short, argues the Pope, in addition to having to suffer poverty, the poor must now accept responsibility for their poverty! This is an absurd claim, born of the overbearing arrogance of individuals bent on achieving unbridled wealth without reference to ethical or social principles. The Holy Father’s appeal to governments and world institutions to accept their responsibility for building a better world based on justice lies at the heart of this *Message* of this *World Day of the Poor*: "If the poor are marginalized, as if they were the ones to blame for their condition, then the very concept of democracy is put into crisis and every social policy becomes bankrupt. With great humility, we should confess that we are often incompetent when it comes to the poor" (*Message*, 7). In short, poverty, is not an abstract idea, nor are the poor the fruit of our imagination; rather, their massive presence in society demands solutions that are the fruit of "creative planning" (*Message*, 7).

“Poverty is not the fruit of destiny; it is the consequence of selfishness” (*Message*, 6). This is why Pope Francis proposes the *via costruens* which “gives rise to *development processes* in which the capacities of all are valued, so that the complementarity of skills and the diversity of roles lead to a common resource of mutual participation” (*Message*, 6). The solution, in short, is much simpler than one might expect. The Pope reiterates his basic idea: *the culture of encounter* as the privileged way to look to the future in an effective way and full of constructive hope. “There are many *poverties* of the "rich" that could be cured by the *wealth* of the "poor", if only they would meet and get to know each other! No one is so poor that they cannot give something of themselves in mutual exchange” (*Message*, 6).

As always, the *World Day of the Poor*, to be celebrated this year on November 14, will be accompanied by an intense week of initiatives aimed at charitable signs towards some particular categories of persons. A drop of water in an ocean of poverty, but still a witness to neighborliness which, at least on those days, will become more tangible in order give concrete support to those who need it most. Last year 5,000 parcels were distributed to the families of the most disadvantaged parishes in Rome and 350,000 masks were given to schools in the periphery of Rome. In the coming months we will be developing new strategies for the *World Day of the Poor* in order to manifest the great solidarity which this occasion requires while at the same time involving the very many people eager to be active participants.

The words of Father Primo Mazzolari, which Pope Francis makes his own, constitute the most significant and provocative conclusion which we all have to face: “I would ask you not to ask me *if there are poor people, who they are and how many of them there are*, because I am afraid that such questions represent a distraction or a pretext for escaping from a specific inspiration in one’s conscience and heart. [...] I have never counted the poor, because they cannot be counted: the poor are embraced, not counted” (*Message*, 9).

+ Rino Fisichella

Intervento di

Mons. Graham Bell

Sotto-Segretario del Pontificio Consiglio per la Promozione della Nuova Evangelizzazione

Intervento di

Mons. Graham Bell

Sotto-Segretario del Pontificio Consiglio per la Promozione della Nuova Evangelizzazione

Intervento di

Mons. Graham Bell

Sotto-Segretario del Pontificio Consiglio per la Promozione della Nuova Evangelizzazione