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Press Conference to present Pope Francis' Message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2019

At 11.30 this morning, in the Holy See Press Office, a press conference was held to present Pope Francis' Message for the 105th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2019, on the theme: "It is not just about migrants", to be held on 29 September.

The panel was composed of: Archbishop Jean-Claude Hollerich, S.J., of Luxembourg, president of the Commission of the Episcopal Conferences of the European Community – COMECE; Fr. Fabio Baggio, C.S., under-secretary of the Section for Migrants and Refugees of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development; Fr. Michael Czerny, S.J., under-secretary of the Section for Migrants and Refugees of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, and Fr. Leonir Chiarello, C.S., superior general of the Scalabrinian Missionaries.

Fr. Fabio Baggio, C.S., explained that the Holy Father's choice of core message and overall theme is intended to emphasize "that his repeated appeals in favour of migrants, refugees, displaced persons and victims of trafficking must be understood within his deep concern for all inhabitants of the existential peripheries", and that to further clarify the title, he has divided the Message according to seven sub-themes. These were first introduced in the communication campaign launched last month by the Migrants and Refugees Section of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, offering "monthly reflections, information and diverse multimedia aids to support deeper appreciation of the theme of the Holy Father's message.

Fr. Baggio went on to present the first four sub-themes:

"It is not just about migrants: it is also about our fears. The fears we feel in the face of today's migratory challenges are real, but we cannot let them deprive us of the desire and ability to meet the other, and in others to meet Jesus Christ.

It is not just about migrants: it's also about charity. Today our migrant brothers and sisters offer us the opportunity to live the highest level of charity, that which is practised towards those who are unable to reciprocate and perhaps even to thank us.

It is not just about migrants: it's also about our humanity. The encounter with the other and with our neighbour's needs offers us the opportunity to restore the humanity of others, to grow in our own humanity and to contribute to building up a true human family.

It is not just about migrants: it's also about not excluding anyone. The little ones, the poor, the most vulnerable are those who pay the price of wars, injustice and exclusive development. We are called, instead, to include everyone in our journey of global growth, so that everyone has access to integral human development”.

Fr. Michael Czerny, S.J., highlighted the fact that the World Day of Migrants and Refugees has reached its 105th edition, which “helps us to put concerns about human mobility in historical perspective. Migration is not an unexpected, unprecedented crisis or emergency. ... The relevant question is: are governments, business, communications and civil society responding competently and responsibly? The Church's role is not a substitute. Instead, as Christians, we commit ourselves to welcome, protect, promote and integrate vulnerable people on the move”.

“Treating them as a ‘single issue’, in isolation, is not helpful”, he continued. “Whether they are departing, passing-through, arriving, settling down, or returning, vulnerable people on the move have affinities and relationships with many others ‘already here’ who are in need. The Holy Father invites us to encounter newcomers, accompany them, pray for them and share life with them, within our wider concern for all marginalized people”. By “rejecting rejection”, our theme “stimulates our curiosity, then our concern, then our compassion, and finally our solidarity”.

Another obstacle, he noted, is group interest – putting one's own group first. “Instead, the true motto of the Christian is ‘The last shall be first’ (Mt 20: 16). ... *It is not just about migrants: it is about putting the last in first place* is the fifth sub-theme. There are many unsung heroes who put vulnerable migrants and refugees in first place, before their own comfort and even safety, by helping in high seas rescues, in offering food and shelter, and simply by listening, healing, praying with them”.

“Another obstacle is the fragmentation of modern, fast-paced life. ... There is great pressure to ignore relationships and deeper meanings in favour of quick consumerism and the flash of an electronic screen. ... Vulnerable migrants remind us existentially that *it is about the whole person, about all people*. Their immediate need and rights are a compelling reminder ... that we cannot be reduced to mere consumers (whether of perishable goods or of fragmentary information) but need to encounter the whole person. Moreover, full and true life cannot be assured for a few while forgetting – or much worse, depriving -- many others. Either we all develop integrally, or there's no integral development for anyone”.

“And the final, seventh consideration brings to mind the inspiring vision of the new Jerusalem with which our Holy Scriptures end in the Book of Revelation. “Now God's home is with humankind ... Now I make all things new” (Rv 21:3,5). This vision *is about building the city of God and man*. Building “our common home” among all people is not easy, particularly because it must not benefit only a few while many are exploited. The vision needs instead to be based on true faith and solid values. “Who welcomes the stranger welcomes me,” Jesus says, “and who welcomes me welcomes the Father who sent me”.

Fr. Czerny suggested that on 29 September, a special Eucharist be celebrated inviting migrants, refugees, survivors of human trafficking, and internally displaced persons, along with the organizations which serve them, as the Holy Father will do in St Peter's Square. “All these special Eucharists in a particular country could be celebrated at the same time in order to give visible expression to the welcome we offer to ‘the stranger’ in Christ and to Christ in the stranger.

Archbishop Jean-Claude Hollerich, S.J., remarked that the Message stimulates discernment by the Church in Europe since it also refers to materialism. “Materialism is not just a force outside the Church” he explained. “It is inside our own hearts, too ... the hearts of bishops, priests, religious and many faithful. If we do not feel called to welcome, protect, promote and integrate people arriving in Europe by migration, it is a sign of the materialism in our hearts ... forgetting those who are needy and marginalized”.

“The Pope’s message is a call to conversion to the Church of Europe, a call to read the signs of our times, to focus our attention not on the divisions in our Church but on living the Gospel. We are reminded that the Church is called to serve the human family. It is about our present and about our future as church in Europe. Our Church in Europe is often like a mother without children ... barren and fruitless”.

“Discernment has to be done along the way ... walking together with other people. Allow me to speak briefly about my trip to Lesbos accompanying Cardinal Krajewski. These refugees, in the grip of hopelessness, are forgotten by Europe. No discernment is possible without seeing their faces, hearing their voices. Could it not be possible for the different dioceses in Europe to forge an agreement with their government and open humanitarian corridors for welcoming the people who have been forgotten for too long?”

“This could be the start of a common discernment, a real synodal process for a true reform of our Church. The Pope’s message is a wake-up call for the Church in Europe. It is not just about migrants it is about our humanity, about our being Christian, about us listening to the call of Christ. And at the same time, it is precisely about migrants, about each of them, about every human person on the margins of Europe ... in camps in Greece and Libya, in various migration centres within member countries of the European Union. All of these people, marginalized in Europe: let us give them a place in the heart of the Church!”

Fr. Leonir Chiarello, C.S., noted that “according to United Nations estimates, there are about 260 million migrants worldwide. Every 10 years this number increases by about 50 million. Migration is not an occasional or passing phenomenon but something structural. It results not only from imbalances in economic and social development and wars, but also from profound changes in states and internationally. To think of stopping migration with administrative decrees, barriers and walls is illusory. It’s like wanting to stop history. And more, it squanders the mutual enrichment that can occur when people of different backgrounds meet”.

The Holy Father rightly reminds us that when we look at migration, we must realize that it is not just a matter of migrants. It’s about the aspirations and needs common to all people, but from which many are excluded. It is about the rebellion that many feel in the face of this exclusion, about the irregularities that they often commit because regular routes are closed, but also about the insensitivity of those who hide within their own indifference and the wickedness of those who take advantage of others’ needs for their own interests, refusing to respect the rights and dignity of others”.

“Aware of these dimensions, the international community took an important step last year with the adoption of the Global Compact on Migration and the Global Compact for Refugees. This important stance of the international community espouses a common vision of migrants and refugees, based on principles of humanitarian law and aimed at achieving benefits for all involved. Much remains to be done, especially in translating inspirational intentions into policies and cooperative initiatives between governments in managing migration. But at least there is a common point of reference, which hopefully will become more than just a fine document. Unfortunately, not all States endorse it, but the initiative shows that cooperation between nations is possible. It is not just about migrants, it is about international civil coexistence”.

The presence of migrants, Fr. Chiarello concluded, “is an opportunity for encounter and for showing concern. It requires knowing how to welcome, how to provide room, how to listen. Here, the story of encounter with God acquires a chapter about meeting God within a stranger, wherein we set aside our certainties based on habits and fears and open up to discovering new truths about ourselves. It’s not just about migrants, it’s about how to be a Church”.
