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Audience with members of the voluntary organization "Ho avuto sete"

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the *Ho avuto sete* ("I was thirsty") voluntary organization.

The following is the Holy Father's greeting to those present:

Greeting of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

I thank the President for her words, and I am pleased to welcome you, ten years on from the beginning of your experience of voluntary work. Since then, you have been united by a clear and urgent aim: to bring drinking water to those who do not have it. And Jesus words: "I was thirsty" (*Mt 25:35*) have become your name and your motto. I congratulate you!

Access to water, in particular clean and drinkable water, is by now a critical point for the present and near future of the human family (cf. Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'* 27-31). It is a priority matter for life on the planet and for peace among peoples. It affects us all. However, in the world, especially in Africa, there are populations that suffer more than others from a lack of access to this primary good. For this reason, you have implemented your humanitarian projects in Africa, in many countries and in various regions of the continent. This is very good. Likewise it is very good that the work is always carried out with local workers and in collaboration with the missionaries and ecclesial communities of the area.

"I was thirsty, and you gave me drink", says Jesus, adding, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (*Mt 25:35, 40*). Dear friends, thirst does not feel so bad when there is plenty to drink. But we know that, if it is lacking, and lacking for a long time, thirst can become unbearable. Life on earth depends on water; even that of us human beings. We all need sister water to live!

Why, then, wage war on each other over conflicts that we should resolve by talking to each other as fellow people? Why not rather join our forces and resources to fight together the real battles of civilization: the fight against hunger and thirst; the fight against disease and epidemics; the fight against poverty and slavery of today. Why? Certain choices are not neutral: to allocate a large part of spending to weapons means taking it away from something else, which means continuing to take it away from those who lack the necessities. And this is an outrage: spending on weapons. How much is spent on weapons, terrible! I don't know what percentage of GDP, I don't know, I don't have the exact figure, but a high percentage. And arms are spent on wars, not only this one, which is very serious, which we are experiencing now, and we feel it more because it is closer, but in Africa, in the Middle East, in Asia, there are continuous wars. This is serious. We need to create the awareness that continuing to spend on weapons sullies the soul, sullies the heart, sullies humanity. What is the use of committing ourselves all together, solemnly, at an international level, in campaigns against poverty, against hunger, against the degradation of the planet, if we then fall back into the old vice of war, into the old strategy of the power of armaments, which takes everything and everyone backwards? A war always takes you backwards, always. We go backwards. We will have to start over again.

Dear brothers and sisters, as you can see, your organization, although small compared to these great problems, is working on a critical point, and doing it well, in the right way; as are, thank God, so many other voluntary organizations in Italy and throughout the world. And I would like to say that I have been surprised to find such a strong voluntary sector here in Italy: I have not seen it elsewhere. This is your cultural, Italian heritage, which you must preserve well. You have a valid volunteerism, and this association is also an important voluntary activity. For this I thank you, and I encourage you to continue in your efforts. I heartily bless all of you and all those who work with you in the various projects. And I also ask you for the gift of praying for me. Thank you!
