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A delegation of lawyers from the member states of the Council of Europe

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience a delegation of lawyers from the member states of the Council of Europe, signatories of the *Vienna Declaration*, to whom he delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Madam, Gentlemen,

I am pleased to receive you, lawyers from various member countries of the Council of Europe. On 11 June 2022, you signed the Vienna Declaration, which urges the member States of the Council to commit themselves in favour of the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary. The Declaration emerges from the present European context, which is problematic in a number of ways, not least because of the senseless war in Ukraine. I thank you for this important contribution to the promotion of democracy and respect for freedom and human dignity. These times of social and economic crisis, as well as a crisis of identity and security, challenge the democracies of the West to provide an effective response, while remaining faithful to their principles. Those principles must be constantly re-appropriated, and their defence calls for great vigilance. Fear of civil unrest and acts of violence, the prospect of destabilizing change and the need to act effectively in confronting emergency situations, can result in the temptation to make exceptions or to restrict – at least provisionally – the rule of law in the effort to find easy and immediate solutions. For this reason, I appreciate your insistence, in one of your proposals, that “the rule of law should no longer be subject to the slightest exceptions, including in times of crisis”. For the rule of law stands at the service of the human person and aims to protect the dignity of each, which admits of no exception. This is a principle.

Crises of this sort are not the only source of threats to freedom and the rule of law within democracies. Indeed, a misguided notion of human nature and of the human person is becoming increasingly influential: a notion that weakens their protection and gradually opens the door to grave abuses under the semblance of good.

It should be noted that the foundation of the dignity of each human person is to be found in his or her

transcendent origin, which thus forbids any violation of that dignity, while at the same time demanding, in all human affairs, respect for the centrality of the person, which otherwise is at the mercy of the whims and powers of the moment (cf. *Address to the European Parliament*, 25 November 2014). In effect, “a Europe that is no longer open to the transcendent dimension of life is a Europe which risks slowly losing its own soul and that ‘humanistic spirit’ which it still loves and defends” (ibid.).

Respect for human rights can be ensured and the rule of law firmly established only to the degree that peoples remain faithful to their roots, which are nourished by truth, the sustenance, the vital lymph of any society that would be truly free, human and fraternal (cf. *Address to the Council of Europe*, 25 November 2011). Without the constant effort to pursue the truth about man, in accordance with God’s plan, individuals become the measure of themselves and their actions. Today, in effect, we are witnessing a tendency to claim more and more individual rights, without taking into account the fact that every human being is part of a social context in which his or her rights and duties are bound up with those of others and with the common good of society itself (cf. *Address to the European Parliament*). An incorrect understanding of the concept of human rights, and their consequent abuse, could well make peoples prey to “angelic forms of purity... dictatorships of relativism... brands of ahistorical fundamentalism... ethical systems lacking kindness, and intellectual discourse bereft of wisdom” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 231). The rule of law would thus stand only at the service of a distorted concept of the human person, manipulated in accordance with economic and ideological interests.

Dear lawyers, I appreciated the concern expressed in your Declaration for the necessary protection of your profession and for the fundamental principle of legal professional privilege, violations of which you have criticized in some member States. I understand and share this concern, and I encourage you in your efforts. It is essential that our societies preserve forms of confidential communication in which individuals can express themselves and lay down their burdens. This is very important. In the Church, we have the secret of Confession; you also have this forum, where a person is able to speak the truth to his or her lawyer so that the lawyer might help.

Finally, I am deeply appreciative of the care that you show for the earth, our common home, and for your willingness to work for the development of a normative framework aimed at protecting the environment. It must never be forgotten that future generations are entitled to receive from our hands a beautiful and habitable world, and that this entails grave responsibilities towards the natural world that we have received from the benevolent hands of God. Thank you for your contribution in this regard. I am currently writing a second part to *Laudato si’* in order to address present problems.

Once more, I encourage you to persevere in the exercise of your profession, which is directed to the service of truth and the justice needed for the advancement of peace in the world and harmony in our societies. May the Blessed Virgin Mary and Saint Yves, patron of lawyers, keep you and watch over you. I bless you from the heart and I ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you!
