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Audience with participants in the meeting organized by the Italian Episcopal Conference for the Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Persons

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the first national meeting of territorial Services and listening Centres for the protection of minors and the most vulnerable, organized by the Italian Episcopal Conference, to whom he delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I greet Cardinal Zuppi, Msgr. Baturi, and Msgr. Ghizzoni, and I greet you all, diocesan and regional representatives of services for the protection of minors and Centres for listening. You represent the commitment of the Church in Italy to promoting a culture of protection for minors and the most vulnerable. I welcome you at the conclusion of your first national meeting, on the day in which, for the third year, all the ecclesial communities in Italy are engaged in prayer, in asking for forgiveness and in raising awareness regarding this painful situation. This is important: the involvement of all of God's people. And I congratulate you for respecting promptly to my invitation, with the report on your territorial network. Thank you.

For this meeting, you have chosen the theme: *Wounded beauty*. "*I will restore health to you, and your wounds I will heal*" (Jer 30:17). In your service, let yourself be guided by this certainty announced by the prophet Jeremiah: the Lord is ready to heal every wound, even the deepest. For this to happen, though, our conversion and the recognition of our shortcomings is necessary. We cannot stop in our action for the protection of the minors and the vulnerable, and at the same time, in countering every form of abuse, whether sexual, or of power or knowledge. In this regard, I would like to suggest three verbs to you, from which you may draw guidance for any initiative: *protect*, *listen* and *heal*. Protect, listen and heal.

First of all, *protect*: participating actively in the suffering of the wounded person and ensuring that all the community is responsible for the protection of minors and those who are most vulnerable. All the Christian

community, in the richness of its components and competences, must be involved, because the action of protection is an integral part of the Church's mission in building the Kingdom of God. Protecting means guiding one's own heart, one's own gaze and one's own work in favour of the smallest and most defenceless. Protection means this. It is a process that requires inner, communitarian renewal, in justice and in truth. Those who protect, who protect their own hearts, know that "no silence or concealment can be accepted on the subject of abuse" – this is a non-negotiable matter – and they also know that it is important to "pursue the ascertainment of the truth and the restoration of justice in the ecclesial community, also in those cases where certain behaviours are not considered crimes by the law of the State, but are under canon law" (cf. CEI-CISM, *Guidelines for the protection of minors and vulnerable persons*). Protecting also means preventing instances of wrongdoing, and this is possible only through constant formation activity, intended to raising awareness and attention towards the protection of the most fragile. And this is important also outside our ecclesiastical world. Just think that, according to global statistics, between 42 and 46 per cent of cases of abuse occur in the family or in the neighbourhood. Everything is covered by silence: uncles, grandparents, brothers, everything. Then, in the world of sports, in schools and so on.

The second element is *listening*. To protect it is necessary to know how to listen, setting aside any form of protagonism and self-interest. Listening is a movement of the heart and it is also a fundamental option to place those who have suffered or are suffering, and those who are most fragile and vulnerable, at the centre of any action we take. Let us think of Jesus, who welcomes the children and all the "little" ones (cf. *Mt* 19:14). Listening to the victims is the necessary step to enable a culture of prevention to grow, which takes shape in the formation of the whole community, in the implementation of procedures and good practices, in vigilance and in that clarity of action that builds and renews trust. Only by listening to the pain of people who have suffered these terrible crimes paves the way to solidarity and drives one to do everything possible to ensure abuse is not repeated. This is the only way to share truly what has happened in a victim's life, so that we feel called to personal and community renewal. We are called to a moral reaction, to promote and bear witness to closeness to those who have been hurt by abuse. "Mending the torn fabric of past experience is a redemptive act, the act of the suffering Servant, who did not avoid pain, but took upon himself the iniquity of us all (cf. *Is* 53:1-14). This is the path of healing and redemption: the path of Christ's cross" (*Address to members of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors*, 5 May 2023). Only by taking the path of protecting and listening is it possible to *heal*. Protecting, listening and healing. In this time the throwaway culture, contrary to things of the Gospel, is widespread; our communities must be a healthy provocation for society, in their capacity to take responsibility for the mistakes of the past and to open up new pathways. The "healing" of wounds is also a work of justice. Precisely for this reason it is important to prosecute those who commit such crimes, especially in ecclesial contexts. And they too have the moral duty of a profound personal conversion, that leads to recognition of their own vocational infidelity, to the resumption of the spiritual life and the humble request for forgiveness from the victims of their actions.

I express, therefore, appreciation for the realities you represent, services for the protection of minors and listening centres throughout the country, as places of reference to find a listening ear. Continue to make every effort, but also to deal with something very bad that happens, which are pornographic films using children. This happens; indeed, it is accessible to anyone who pays, using their phone. Where are they made, these films? Who is responsible? In which country? Please, work on this: it is a battle we must fight, because the worst things are spread via our smartphones. Continue to make every effort to ensure that those who have been harmed by the scourge of abuse may feel free to turn with confidence to the listening Centres, finding that welcome and that support that can soothe their wounds and renew their betrayed trust. To heal is to share ecclesial passion and expertise with the commitment to forming the greatest possible number of pastoral workers. In this way, a genuine cultural change is promoted, placing at the centre the smallest and most vulnerable in the Church and in society. This ecclesial action of yours can foster the growth of attention in Italian society as a whole on this scourge that unfortunately involves many, too many, minors and adults.

The results of the survey on the activities of the Services and Centres that you have handed over to me today highlight precisely the good that you know how to do in the area, making yourselves close to those who have suffered a lacerating wound. What you are doing is valuable both for the victims and for the entire Church community. What emerges from these pages is the testimony of a constant and shared commitment. This is the way to create trust, the trust that leads to real renewal.

Finally, I would like to thank you for the support you are providing to other Bishops' Conferences; as well as for supporting the plans of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors towards those countries, especially developing countries, that have few resources for prevention and implementation of protection policies.

Keep going! Keep going: I am close to you in your work and I bless you from my heart. I pray for you, because your work is not easy, and you, please, do not forget to pray for me, because my work, too, is not easy. Thank you.
