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Audience with the Prefects of the Italian Republic

This morning, in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the Prefects of the Italian Republic.

The following is the Pope's address to those present at the audience:

Address of the Holy Father

Mr. Minister,

Distinguished Prefects,

I greet you cordially and I welcome you with pleasure, a few days after the feast of your Patron, Saint Ambrose: he too, albeit in different historical circumstances, was a prefect, before being called by God in an unexpected way to become shepherd of the people of God in Milan. And this phrase of his is well-known: "You think times are bad, times are tough, times are difficult. Live well and you will change the times". Live well and you will change the times: what a beautiful phrase! These words can also refer to the substance of your service: ensure that the inhabitants of the places that are entrusted to you can "live well".

To fulfil this task, you act as intermediaries between the State and the territory, constantly linking the whole with the parts, the centre with the peripheries, the common good with attention to individuals. At the institutional level, your office carries out those "daily efforts to expand our circle" (*Fratelli tutti*, 97), whereby each citizen, especially those in difficult situations, experiences, in the presence of the State, the concrete closeness of the civil community. Therefore, you take on various challenges, such as security and public order in a given territory, and various services to individuals and communities. I would like to focus briefly on three of these challenges: *public order*, *critical environmental issues* and the *management of migratory flows*.

Public order. This is the priority, and also most delicate aspect of your work, because it requires you, often in unpredictable and emergency situations, to combine respect for the law with attention to the human aspect. Legality and humanity together, to give the rules the necessary application and at the same time approach those who err with due respect, reconciling the protection of victims with the fair treatment of offenders. Added to this is the great responsibility you have to manage the daily risks run by the members of the police force, whom you also take care of. For the performance of your public duties, it may be good to recall an ancient maxim, which refers to the order of personal life: “*serva ordinem et ordo servabit te*”, “keep order and order will save you”; it will guard you, it will save you. This is a wise statement, for one cannot administer public order without personal, inner order. But when there is this, responsibility for public order is felt as a call to create that climate of harmonious coexistence through which difficulties can be faced and resolved. I would say that yours is a kind of institutional paternity: exercised with conscience and dedication, it spares no sacrifices and sleepless nights and deserves our gratitude.

Second point: *critical environmental issues.* Your rootedness in the territories leads me to this second reflection: although they do not fall within your direct competences, hydro-geological problems are unfortunately now frequent emergencies that involve everyone; linked to atmospheric phenomena that should be unusual and extraordinary, they have become habitual due to climate change. We have witnessed this in recent times: think, to name but a few, of the recent disasters in Emilia Romagna, Tuscany and Sicily. But it was precisely in those circumstances that we were able to admire, beyond sterile polemics, the best qualities of the Italian people, who, especially in difficulties, know how to unite in an exemplary manner, combining the diligence of institutions with the commitment of citizens. It is up to you to manage the available resources in the best way possible, and to bring together public and private operators. It is important and urgent, in the present as well as in the future, to join forces to protect our common home in good time and with foresight.

And finally, *migratory flows*, with their delicate management at local level. Even this task is not easy, because it entrusts to your care wounded people, vulnerable people, often lost and recovering from terrible traumas. They are faces, not numbers: people who cannot simply be categorized, but need to be embraced; brothers and sisters who need to be extricated from the tentacles of criminal organizations, capable of speculating mercilessly on their misfortunes. We have heard about the “lagers” in some North African countries, where those who want to come to Europe are treated like slaves, tortured, even killed. You are given the arduous task of organizing an orderly welcome for them on the ground, based on integration and constructive inclusion in the local fabric. You cannot be left alone in this task of supporting them in their basic needs and at the same time listening to the apprehensions and tensions that may be generated among residents, as well as naturally intervening when situations of disorder and violence arise.

We must be careful. Migrants must be received, accompanied, promoted and integrated. If this is not present, there is danger; if there is not this journey towards integration, there is danger. And this also makes me think of another problem. Migrants help, when they are well integrated. Italy is a land where there is a lack of children, and where migrants come. I am worried about the problem of the declining birth rate here in Italy. People do not have children. One of my secretaries said that he was walking through the square the other day, and was approached by a woman who had a baby stroller. He went to caress the child... and it was a little dog! Puppies have taken the place of babies. Think about this. The responsibility of Italians to have children to grow, and also to receive migrants as children.

In conclusion, I reiterate my gratitude for your visit and for your daily commitment to the common good. Thank you, because you strive for peaceful coexistence in the diverse territories of our Italy, rich in traditions and values that speak of cohesion, welcome, and solidarity. I take this opportunity to wish you all the best for the upcoming Christmas festivities: may God, who, by incarnating himself, came to inhabit our spaces, bless you, bless the peoples and territories you serve. And do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.
