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Health is a universal right, and access to healthcare services cannot be a privilege, says the Pope to the members of Doctors with Africa (CUAMM)

Vatican City, 7 May 2016 – This morning Pope Francis received in audience nine thousand members of the organisation "Doctors with Africa" (CUAMM - Collegio Universitario Aspiranti e Medici Missionari) who work to protect the health of African populations and to draw up and implement wide-ranging development projects. The organisation was founded 65 years ago by Dr. Francesco Canova and Fr. Luigi Mazzucato and carries out its mission in Uganda, Tanzania, Mozambique, Etiopia, Angola, South Sudan and Sierra Leone, the poorest "last mile" of healthcare systems, as the Pope said in his address, in which he emphasised that health "is not a consumer good, but rather a universal right, and therefore access to healthcare services cannot be a privilege."

"Healthcare, especially at the most basic level, is indeed denied in many parts of the world and many regions of Africa. It is not a right for all, but rather it is still a privilege reserved to the few, to those who can afford it. Access to healthcare services, treatment and medicines remains a mirage. The poorest are unable to pay and are excluded from hospital services, even the most essential primary care. Your generous activity in support of a capillary network of services, able to answer the needs of the populations, is therefore important."

The countries where CUAMM is active are "the geographical peripheries in which the Lord sends you to be good Samaritans, to reach out to the poor Lazarus, through the door that leads from the first to the third world. This is your 'holy door!'" exclaimed Francis, noting that CUAMM works with the most vulnerable sectors of the population, including mothers, ensuring safe and dignified childbirth, and newborns, as in Africa many women continue to die in childbirth, and many children do not survive beyond the first month of life as a result of malnutrition and epidemics. "You are able to be an expression of the mother Church, who stoops to be the weakest and cares for them."

He went on to indicate that authentic and lasting development processes must have a long-term outlook, "with the logic of sowing trustfully and patiently awaiting fruit", as Africa "is in need of patient and constant, tenacious and competent accompaniment", and interventions require "serious work planning, research and innovation, and impose the duty of transparency towards donors and in relation to public opinion."

"You are doctors 'with' Africa and not 'for' Africa", Francis acknowledged. "You are called to involve the African

people in the process of growth, walking with them, sharing difficulties and joys, suffering and enthusiasm. The people are the architects of their own development, the first to take responsibility. I know that you face daily challenges with gratuitousness and disinterested help, without proselytism or occupation of spaces. Rather, you do so by collaborating with the Churches and local governments, according to the logic of participation and sharing of commitments and mutual responsibilities. I urge you to maintain your special approach to local realities, helping them to grow and leaving them once they are able to continue by themselves, from the perspective of development and sustainability. It is the logic of the seed, that disappears and dies to bring lasting fruit".

Finally, he emphasised that following the teachings of its founders, witnesses of a evangelically fruitful missionary approach based on closeness, CUAMM carries out its work with courage, as the expression of a Church that is not a "super clinic for VIPs" but rather a "field hospital". A Church with a great heart, close to the many wounded and humiliated of history, in the service of the poorest."
