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Francis to World Food Programme staff: pray for me so that I too can fight hunger

Vatican City, 13 June 2016 – After pronouncing his discourse before the World Food Programme, the Pope greeted a number of officials injured in service, before proceeding to the garden of the building where he was awaited by staff and their family members, and the children in the adjacent kindergarten. Francis set aside his prepared discourse in Spanish, published in translation below, and instead addressed some extemporaneous remarks in Italian to those present.

"The first thing I would like to say to you, in my poor Italian, is thank you. Thank you for the hidden work you do, the work 'behind the scenes', that we do not see but which makes it possible for everything to go ahead. You are like the foundation of a building: without foundations the building cannot remain standing. Many projects, many things can be done and are done in the world, in the fight against hunger, and they are done by courageous people. But this is thanks to your support, to your hidden help. Your names appear only in the list of staff – and at the end of the month in the salary list – but outside no-one knows what you are called. And yet your names make this great work possible, this great struggle against hunger. Thanks to a little work, a small sacrifice, your hidden sacrifice, great or small, many children are able to eat, and much hunger is vanquished. Thank you.

"When I heard the director of the Programme speak, I thought to myself: this is a brave woman! And I believe that you all have this courage: the courage of taking forward your work 'behind the scenes', and helping. There is the courage of those people that we see, because in a body there are feet, there are hands, and there is also the face: we see the face but not the feet as they are hidden in the shoes, but you are the feet, the hands, that support the courage of all those who go ahead, that have also supported the courage of your martyrs, let us say, of your witnesses. Never, ever forget the names written there at the entrance. They have been able to do those things because of the courage they had and for the faith they had in their work, but also because they were supported by your work. Thank you very much. And I ask you to pray for me, so that I too may be able to do something against hunger."

The following is the address prepared by the Pope for the staff of the World Food Programme.

"Good day! I am happy to be able to meet you in this simple and familiar setting, typical of the style with which you carry out your work in the service of so many of our brothers and sisters. In you, they see reflected that face of today's world that is concerned for solidarity and mutual assistance. My thoughts also turn to your many

colleagues throughout the world who cooperate with the World Food Programme. I thank all of you for your warm and friendly welcome.

The Executive Director has told me of the important work which you do with great competence, generosity and no small sacrifice, often in situations that are challenging and insecure as a result of natural or human causes. The breadth and gravity of the problems addressed by the World Food Programme demands your steady enthusiasm, unstinting commitment and constant readiness to serve. Together with continuing professional formation, great sensitivity and intuition, you are called to have a deep sense of compassion, without which everything else would lack real effectiveness and meaning.

The WFP has entrusted you with a lofty mission. The success of that mission depends in no small part on your ability not to get bogged down in bureaucratic details, but to bring initiative, imagination and professionalism to your daily work, as you seek new and effective ways to eliminate the malnutrition and hunger suffered by so many people throughout the world. They are pleading for our attention and concern. That is why it is important not to get weighed down by dossiers but to see, behind each of those papers, a real person with a real and often painful story. The secret is to see behind every dossier a human face in need of assistance. Hearing the cry of the poor will help you to avoid viewing each case in cold bureaucratic terms. We can never do enough to eliminate so terrible a phenomenon as hunger.

Hunger is one of the major threats to peace in our world. It is a threat that we cannot be content merely to deplore or to study academically. It has to be decisively faced and urgently resolved. Each of us, within his or her own area of responsibility, must do everything possible to bring about a definitive solution to this human tragedy, which degrades and shortens the lives of so many of our brothers and sisters. When it comes to helping those who are starving, none can be exempted or think they are excused because the problem is too big, or one that does not affect them.

Development – human, social, technical and economic – is the essential way to ensure that each person, family, community and people can meet its basic needs. This means that our work is not in the service of some abstract idea or the defence of some theoretical dignity, but aimed at protecting the life of each human being. In the poorest and most depressed areas, this means providing food in the case of emergencies, but also enabling access to funding and technical resources, employment and microcredit, and in this way ensuring that the local population increases its ability to respond to unexpected crises.

Here I am not referring simply to material matters. What is needed above all else is a moral commitment that makes it possible for me to feel responsibility for the person beside me, as well as for the overall goal of the programme as a whole. You are called to advance and protect this commitment through a service that might appear at first glance to be exclusively technical in nature. Instead, what you are achieving are actions that call for a great moral strength, because they help build up the common good in each country and in the entire international community.

In the face of so many challenges and crises, it might appear that the future of humanity will simply involve facing ever new and interrelated problems and threats, unpredictable both in their extent and in their complexity. This is something you know quite well from your own experience. But it should not dishearten us. Encourage and help one another to avoid the temptation of discouragement or indifference. More importantly, believe firmly that your daily efforts are helping to give our world a human face and to make it into a place whose cardinal points are compassion, solidarity, mutual assistance and gratuity. The greater your generosity, your tenacity and your faith, the more will multilateral forms of cooperation be able to devise suitable solutions to these troubling problems. The more they will succeed in expanding short-sighted and selfish visions, in opening new paths to hope, a just human development, sustainability and efforts to close the gap of unjust economic inequalities, which so greatly harm the most vulnerable members of our human family.

Upon each of you and your families, and upon your contributions to the World Food Programme, I invoke God's abundant blessings. I ask all of you to pray for me, from the heart, or at least to wish me well. I need this very much."
