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## **Video Message of the Holy Father Francis for the convention “Meeting of Catholics who assume political responsibility in the service of Latin American peoples” (1-3 December 2017)**

From 1 to 3 December a convention entitled “Meeting of Catholics who assume political responsibility in the service of Latin American peoples”, organized by the Pontifical Commission for Latin America and the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM), will be held in Bogotá, seat of the Colombian Episcopal Conference.

The following is the text of the video message sent by the Holy Father Francis to the participants:

### **Video Message of the Holy Father**

Good morning!

I wish to greet and thank, first of all, the political leaders who have accepted the invitation to participate in an event that I too have encouraged since its genesis: the “Meeting of Catholics who assume political responsibility in the service of Latin American peoples”. I also greet the Cardinals and bishops who accompany them, with whom they will certainly engage in a dialogue very beneficial to all.

From Pope Pius XII onwards, subsequent pontiffs have always referred to political as a “high form of charity”. It can also be translated as an inestimable service of commitment to realizing the common good of society. Politics is, above all, service: it is not the servant of individual ambitions, of the arrogance of factions or centres of interests. As a service, it is not a master either, claiming to govern all the dimensions of the life of the people, even relapsing into forms of autocracy and totalitarianism. And when I speak of autocracy and totalitarianism I do not refer to the last century. I am talking about today, in today’s world, and perhaps also in some countries in Latin America. It could be said that the service of Jesus – Who came to serve, not to be served – and the service that the Lord demands of His apostles and disciples is analogous to the kind of service that is asked of politicians. It is a service of sacrifice and surrender, to the point that sometimes politicians may be considered as “martyrs” to causes for the common good of their nations.

The fundamental point of reference for this service, which requires perseverance, commitment and intelligence, is the common good, without which the rights and the noblest aspirations of individuals, families and intermediate groups in general would not be fully realized, because the ordered and civil space in which to live and operate would be lacking. The common good can be conceived as an atmosphere of growth of the person, of the family, of the intermediate groups. The common good. Vatican Council II defined the common good, in accordance with the patrimony of the Social Doctrine of the Church, as “the sum of those conditions of the social life whereby men, families and associations more adequately and readily may attain their own perfection” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 74). It is clear that there is no need to oppose service to power – nobody wants an impotent power! – but power must be governed by service so as not to degenerate. That is, any power that is not ordered to the service degenerates. Of course I am referring to “good politics”, in its most noble sense, and not to the degenerations of what we call “politicking”. “There is no better way to establish political life on a truly human basis than by fostering an inward sense of justice and kindness, and of service to the common good, and by strengthening basic convictions as to the true nature of the political community and the aim, right exercise, and sphere of action of public authority” (*ibid.*, 73). Please be assured that the Catholic Church “praises and esteems the work of those who for the good of men devote themselves to the service of the state and take on the burdens of this office” (*ibid.*, 75).

At the same time, I am sure that we all feel the need to *rehabilitate the dignity of politics*. If I refer to Latin America, how can we fail to observe the popular discredit that all political groups are suffering, the crisis of the political parties, the absence of high-level political debates on national and Latin American projects or of strategies that go beyond policies of minor importance! In addition, open and respectful dialogue that seeks possible convergences is often replaced by outbursts of reciprocal accusations and demagogic relapses. There is also a lack of formation and the replacement of new political generations. That is why people look from afar and criticize politicians, seeing them as a corporation of professionals who look after their own interests, or denouncing them with rage, sometimes without the necessary distinctions, as if tinged with corruption. This has nothing to do with the necessary and positive participation of the peoples, passionate about their own life and destiny, which should animate the political scene of the nations. What is clear is that political leaders are needed who live with passion their service to the people, who vibrate with the intimate fibres of their *ethos* and culture, in solidarity with their sufferings and hopes; politicians who put the common good before their own private interests, who are not intimidated by the great financial and media powers, who are competent and patient in the face of complex problems, who are open to listening and learning in democratic dialogue, who combine the search for justice with mercy and reconciliation. Let us not be satisfied with the smallness of politics: we need political leaders capable of mobilizing vast sectors of the population in pursuit of great national and Latin American objectives. I personally know Latin American political leaders with a distinct political orientation, who approach this ideal figure.

How much we are in need of a good and noble politics, and its protagonists, here in Latin America! Do we not have to face problems and challenges of a great magnitude? First of all, the protection of the gift of life in all its stages and manifestations. Latin America is also in need of industrial, technological, self-sustained and sustainable growth, together with policies that confront the drama of poverty and that aim at equity and inclusion, as that which leaves unprotected masses and continues that fuel scandalous social inequality cannot be considered true development. A comprehensive education, starting in the family and developing in a quality school education for all, is indispensable. We must strengthen the family and social fabric. A culture of encounter – and not of permanent antagonisms – must strengthen the fundamental bonds of humanity and sociability and lay a sound foundation for a social friendship that leaves behind individualism and massification, polarization and manipulation. We have to move towards mature, participatory democracies, free of the scourges of corruption, or of ideological colonization, or autocratic pretensions and cheap demagogues. Let us take care of our common home and its most vulnerable inhabitants, avoiding all kinds of suicidal indifference and unbridled exploitation. Let us raise again in a concrete way our demand for the economic, social, cultural and political integration of brother peoples to build our continent, which will be even greater when it brings together “all the bloodlines”, completing its fusion, as a paradigm of respect for human rights, peace and justice. We can not resign ourselves to the deteriorated situation with which we often struggle today.

I would like to take a further step in this reflection. Pope Benedict XVI noted with concern, in his inaugural speech of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate in Aparecida, “the notable absence in

the political sphere ... of the voices and initiatives of Catholic leaders with strong personalities and generous dedication, who are coherent in their ethical and religious convictions". And the bishops throughout the continent wished to incorporate this observations in the conclusions of Aparecida, referring to "disciples and missionaries in public life" (502). Indeed, in a continent with a large number of baptized in the Catholic Church, with a Catholic cultural substratum, in which the Catholic tradition is still very much alive in the villages and in which the great manifestations of popular piety abound, how is it possible that Catholics appear somewhat irrelevant on the political scene, often assimilating a worldly logic? It is true that there are testimonies of exemplary Catholics on the public scene, but we note the absence of strong currents opening the way to the Gospel in the political life of nations. And this does not mean proselytizing through politics – it has nothing to do with it. There are many who confess to being Catholics – and we are not able to judge their consciences, only their actions, which often reveal a lack of coherence with the ethical and religious convictions of Catholic teaching. We do not know what happens in a person's conscience, we can not judge, but we see his actions. There are others who live so absorbed their political commitments that their faith is being relegated to the background, impoverished, without the ability to be guiding criteria and to give their stamp to all the dimensions of life of the person, including their praxis politics. And there is no shortage of those who do not feel recognized, encouraged, accompanied and sustained in the custody and growth of their faith, by the Pastors and the Christian communities. In the end, the Christian contribution in the political event appears only through statements of the Episcopates, without noticing the peculiar mission of the Catholic laity to order, manage and transform society according to the evangelical criteria and the patrimony of the Social Doctrine of the church.

Therefore, I wanted to choose as a theme for the previous Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America: "The indispensable commitment of lay Catholics in the public arena of Latin American countries" (1-4 March 2017). And on March 13, I sent a letter to the President of that Commission, Cardinal Marc Ouellet, in which once again I warned of the risk of clericalism and posed the question: "What does it mean for us pastors that the laity are working in public life?". "It means looking for ways to encourage, accompany and stimulate attempts, efforts that are already made today to keep hope and faith alive in a world of contradictions especially for the poorest. It means as pastors to commit ourselves in the midst of our people and with our people to sustain the faith and their hope. Opening doors, working with them, dreaming with them, reflecting and especially praying with them. We need to recognize the city – and therefore all the spaces where the life of our people takes place – with a contemplative outlook, a look of faith that discovers the God Who dwells in their homes, in their streets, in their squares".

On the contrary, "many times we have fallen prey to the temptation of thinking that the so-called 'active layperson' is one who is occupied with the works of the Church and / or matters of the parish or the diocese, and we think little about how accompany a baptized person in his public and daily life; or of how he commits himself as a Christian in public life. Without realizing it, we have generated a lay elite believing that the 'active laity' are only those who work on things 'of priests' and we have forgotten and neglected the believer who often burns his hope in the daily struggle to live his faith. These are the situations that clericalism can not see, since it is very concerned about dominating spaces rather than generating processes. Therefore, we must recognize that the layperson by his own reality, by his own identity, by being immersed in the heart of social, public and political life, by being in the midst of new cultural forms that are continually being gestated, has a need for new forms of organization and celebration of the faith".

It is necessary for lay Catholics not to be indifferent to the public, nor to withdraw inside temples, nor to wait for directives and ecclesiastical slogans to fight for justice and for more humane forms of life for all. "It is never the pastor who tells the layperson what he has to do or say, they know better than we do ... It is not the pastor who has to determine what the faithful have to say in different spheres. As pastors, united with our people, it is good for us to ask ourselves how we are stimulating and promoting charity and fraternity, the desire for good, and truth and justice. To do this so that corruption does not exist in our hearts". Even in our hearts, as pastors. And, at the same time, it is good for us to listen with great attention to the experience, reflections and concerns that lay people who live their faith in the various spheres of social and political life can share with us.

Your sincere dialogue in this meeting is very important. Speak freely. A dialogue that is between Catholics – prelates and politicians – in which the communion between people of the same faith is more decisive than the legitimate oppositions of political options. Not without reason do we participate in the Eucharist, the source and

summit of all communion. From your dialogue, illuminating factors may be drawn, guiding factors for the mission of the Church today. Thank you once again, and I wish you well in your work!

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