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Letter of the Holy Father Francis to the President of the Pontifical Academy for Life on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the institution of the Pontifical Academy

The following is the letter sent by the Holy Father Francis to the president of the Pontifical Academy for Life, H.E. Msgr. Vincenzo Paglia, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the institution of the Pontifical Academy, which took place on 11 February 1994:

Letter of the Holy Father

Humana Communitas
[The Human Community]

The human community is God's dream even from before the creation of the world (cf. *Eph* 1:3-14). In it, the eternal Son begotten of God the Father has taken flesh and blood, heart and emotions. Through the mystery of giving life, the great family of humanity is enabled to discover its true meaning. The ability of the family to initiate its members to human fraternity can be considered a hidden treasure that can aid that general rethinking of social policies and human rights whose need is so urgently felt today. All of us ought to grow in the awareness of our common origin in God's love and creative act. Christian faith confesses the begetting of the Son as the ineffable mystery of the eternal unity between "bringing into being" and "benevolent love" within the life of the Triune God. A renewed proclamation of this often overlooked revelation can open a new chapter in the history of human community and culture, which today cries out — "groaning as if in labour pains" (cf. *Rom* 8:22) — for rebirth in the Spirit. God's tenderness and his will to redeem all those who feel lost, abandoned, discarded, or hopelessly condemned, is revealed in the only-begotten Son. The mystery of the eternal Son who became one of us is the definitive witness to this "passion" of God. The mystery of Christ's cross — "for us and for our salvation" — and resurrection — as "the firstborn of many brothers" (*Rom* 8:29) — tells us the extent to which God's passion is directed to the redemption and full flourishing of human beings.

We need to renew a lively awareness of God's passion for humanity and its world. Human beings were made by God "in his image" — "male and female" (*Gen* 1:27) — as spiritual and sentient, conscious and free. The

relationship between man and woman is the primary place where all creation speaks with God and bears witness to his love. This world is the place where we are brought to life; it is the place and time in which we gain a foretaste of the heavenly home that is our destiny (cf. *2 Cor* 5:1) and where we will live fully our communion with God and with all others. The human family is a community with a common origin and a common goal, whose attainment “is hidden, with Christ, in God” (*Col* 3:1-4). In our time, the Church is called once more to propose the humanism of the life that bursts forth from God’s passion for human beings. Our commitment to valuing, supporting and defending the life of every human being is ultimately motivated by God’s unconditional love. Such is the beauty and the allure of the Gospel, which does not reduce love of neighbour to criteria of economic or political convenience, or to “certain doctrinal or moral points based on specific ideological options” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 39).

A passionate and productive history

1. That passion has inspired the work of the Pontifical Academy for Life from the time it was created twenty-five years ago by Saint John Paul II at the prompting of the eminent scientist and Servant of God Jérôme Lejeune. Recognizing the rapid and sweeping changes taking place in biomedicine, Pope John Paul saw the need for a more structured and organic approach and engagement in this area. The Academy was thus able to promote initiatives of research, education and communications aimed at demonstrating “*that science and technology, at the service of the human person and his fundamental rights, contribute to the overall good of man and to the fulfilment of the divine plan of salvation.*” (SAINT JOHN PAUL II, *Motu Proprio Vitae Mysterium* [11 February 1994], 3). The new statutes of the Academy, issued on 18 October 2016, have given renewed impetus to its activities. The goal of the statutes is to make the Academy’s reflection on human life issues ever more attuned to the contemporary scene. The ever-quickening pace of technological and scientific innovation, and the phenomenon of globalization have multiplied interactions between cultures, religions and different fields of study, and among the many dimensions of our human family and the earth, our common home. “*There is an urgent need for greater study and discussion of the social effects of this technological development, for the sake of articulating an anthropological vision adequate to this epochal challenge. Yet your expert advice cannot be limited solely to offering solutions to the questions raised by specific ethical, social or legal conflict situations. The proposal of forms of conduct consistent with human dignity involves the theory and practice of science and technology in terms of their overall approach to life, its meaning and its value*” (5 October 2017).

Loss of the human dimension and the paradox of “progress”

2. At this moment in time, passion for what is distinctively human, and for the whole human family, encounters serious obstacles. The joys of family relationships and social coexistence appear seriously diminished. Mutual distrust between individuals and peoples is being fed by an inordinate pursuit of self-interest and intense competition that can even turn violent. The gap between concern with one’s own well-being and the prosperity of the larger human family seems to be stretching to the point of complete division. In the Encyclical *Laudato Si*, I pointed to the state of emergency existing in our relationship with the history of the earth and its peoples. This alarming situation is the result of the scarce attention paid to the decisive global issue of the unity of the human family and its future. The erosion of this sensitivity, due to worldly forces of conflict and war, is growing worldwide at a much higher rate than that of the production of goods. We are speaking of a real culture – indeed, it would be better to speak of anti-culture – of indifference to the community: hostile to men and women and in league with the arrogance of wealth.

3. This emergency reveals a paradox. How could it happen that, at the very moment of history when available economic and technological resources make it possible for us to care suitably for our common home and our human family, in obedience to God’s command, those same economic and technological resources are creating

our most bitter divisions and our worst nightmares? People sense acutely and painfully, albeit often confusedly, the spiritual dejection, or even nihilism, that subordinates life itself to a world and a society dominated by this paradox. The attempt to dull this sense of deep distress by the blind pursuit of material pleasure produces the ennui of a life lacking in a purpose that can satisfy its spiritual yearning. Let us face the fact: men and women in our time are often demoralized and disoriented, bereft of vision. All of us are, to some extent, closed in on ourselves. The financial system and the ideology of consumerism regulate our needs and manipulate our desires, with little concern for beauty of a life in common and for the sustainability of our common home.

4. Christians, hearing the cry of suffering peoples, need to react against the negativity that foments division, indifference and hostility. They must do so not simply for their own sake, but for that of everyone. And they need to do so now, before it is too late. The ecclesial family of disciples – and of all others who seek in that family reasons for hope (cf. *1 Pet* 3:15) – has been planted on earth as “a sacrament, a sign and instrument a communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race” (*Lumen Gentium*, 1). The restoration of each of God’s creatures to the joyful hope of his or her spiritual destiny must become the passionate theme of our preaching. It is urgent that the elderly have greater confidence in their best “dreams” and that the young have “visions” able to sustain them to act boldly in history (cf. *Jl* 3:1). At the level of culture, our goal must be a new and universal ethical perspective attentive to the themes of creation and human life. We cannot continue down the mistaken path followed in recent decades of allowing humanism to be deconstructed and considered simply as another ideology of the will to power. We must resist such ideologies, however strongly urged by the market and by technology, and choose humanism. The distinctiveness of human life is an absolute good, worthy of being ethically defended, precious for the care of creation as a whole. For humanism not to draw inspiration from the loving act of God would be a contradiction and a scandal. The Church must be the first to rediscover the beauty of this inspiration and make her contribution with renewed enthusiasm.

A difficult task for the Church

5. We acknowledge the difficulties involved in restoring this broader humanistic horizon, even within the Church. First, we can ask frankly if our ecclesial communities today realize and testify to the gravity of this contemporary emergency. Are they seriously focused on the passion and joy of proclaiming God’s love for the dwelling of his children on the earth? Or are they still overly focused on their own problems and on making timid accommodations to an essentially worldly outlook? We can question seriously whether we have done enough as Christians to offer our specific contribution to a vision of humanity capable of upholding the unity of the family of peoples in today’s political and cultural conditions. Or whether we have lost sight of its centrality, putting our ambition for spiritual hegemony over the governance of the secular city, concentrated as it is upon itself and its wealth, ahead of a concern for local communities inspired by the Gospel spirit of hospitality towards the poor and the hopeless.

Building universal fraternity

6. It is time for a new vision aimed at promoting a humanism of fraternity and solidarity between individuals and peoples. We know that the faith and love needed for this covenant draw their power from the mystery of history’s redemption in Jesus Christ, a mystery hidden in God even before the creation of the world (cf. *Eph* 1:7-10; 3:9-11; *Col* 1:13-14). We know too that human minds and hearts are not completely closed or insensible to the seeds of faith and the works of this universal fraternity sown by the Gospel of the kingdom of God. We must once again bring this fraternity to the fore. For it is one thing to feel forced to live together, but something entirely different to value the richness and beauty of the seeds of common life needing to be sought out and cultivated. It is one thing to resign oneself to seeing life as a battle against constant foes, but something entirely different to see our human family as a sign of the abundant life of God the Father and the promise of a common

destiny redeemed by the infinite love that even now sustains it in being.

7. The ways of the Church all lead to man, as Saint John Paul II solemnly proclaimed in his first encyclical (*Redemptor Hominis*, 1979). Before him, Saint Paul VI, echoing the teaching of the Council, had stated in his own first encyclical that the Church family extends in concentric circles to all men and women, even to those who consider themselves extraneous to the faith and the worship of God (cf. *Ecclesiam Suam*, 1964). The Church shelters and protects the signs of grace and mercy that God offers to every human being who comes into this world.

Recognizing the signs of hope

8. In this mission, we are encouraged by signs that God is at work in our time. These signs need to be acknowledged and not overshadowed by certain negative factors. Along these lines, Saint John Paul II pointed to the many efforts to welcome and defend human life, the growing opposition to war and to the death penalty, and a greater concern for the quality of life and ecology. He also indicated as a sign of hope the development of bioethics as “reflection and dialogue – between believers and nonbelievers, as well as between believers of different religions – on ethical problems, even the most fundamental ones, that affect the life of man” (*Evangelium Vitae*, 27). The scientific community of the Pontifical Academy for Life has demonstrated, over the past twenty-five years, its ability to enter into this dialogue and to offer its own competent and respected contribution. A sign of this is its constant effort to promote and protect human life at every stage of its development, its condemnation of abortion and euthanasia as extremely grave evils that contradict the Spirit of life and plunge us into the anti-culture of death. These efforts must certainly continue, with an eye to emerging issues and challenges that can serve as an opportunity for us to grow in the faith, to understand it more deeply and to communicate it more effectively to the people of our time.

The future of the Academy

9. Before all else, we need to enter into the language and lives of men and women today, making the Gospel message incarnate in their concrete experiences, as the Council demanded. To appreciate the meaning of human life, we should begin with the experience of procreation; this will enable us to avoid reducing life merely to a biological concept or a universal abstraction divorced from relationships and from history. The primordial reality of our “flesh” precedes and makes possible all further consciousness and reflection, preventing us from thinking that we are the source of our own existence. Only after receiving the gift of life, and prior to any intention or decision of our own, can we become aware that we are in fact alive. Life necessarily entails being a child, welcomed and cared for, however inadequately in certain cases. “It thus seems reasonable to see a connection between the care we have received from the beginning of life, that enabled it to grow and develop, and the responsible care we in turn give to others... This precious connection preserves a human and God-given dignity that endures, even despite one’s loss of health, role in society and control over his or her body” (*Letter of the Cardinal Secretary of State to the Conference on Palliative Care*, 28 February 2018).

10. We know that the threshold of basic respect for human life is being crossed, and brutally at that, not only by instances of individual conduct but also by the effects of societal choices and structures. Business strategies and the pace of technological growth now, as never before, condition biomedical research, educational priorities, investment decisions and the quality of interpersonal relationships. The possibility of directing economic development and scientific progress towards the covenant between man and woman, towards caring for our

common humanity and towards the dignity of the human person, surely arises from a love for creation that faith helps us to deepen and illuminate. The prospect of a global bioethics, with a broad vision and a concern for the impact of the environment on life and health, offers a significant opportunity for strengthening the new covenant between the Gospel and creation.

11. Our shared humanity demands a global approach to the questions raised by the dialogue between diverse cultures and societies that, in today's world, are in increasingly close contact. May the Academy for Life be a place for courageous dialogue in the service of the common good. I encourage you not to be afraid to advance arguments and formulations that can serve as a basis for intercultural and interreligious, as well as interdisciplinary, exchanges. But also to take part in the discussion of human rights, which are central to the search for universally acceptable criteria for decisions. At stake is the understanding and exercise of a justice that demonstrates the essential role of responsibility in the discussion of human rights and about their close correlation with duties, beginning with solidarity with those in greatest need. Pope Benedict XVI has spoken of the importance of "a renewed reflection on how rights presuppose duties, if they are not to become mere licence. Nowadays we are witnessing a grave inconsistency. On the one hand, appeals are made to alleged rights, arbitrary and non-essential in nature, accompanied by the demand that they be recognized and promoted by public structures, while, on the other hand, elementary and basic rights remain unacknowledged and are violated in much of the world". Among those rights, the Pope emeritus points to "lack of food, drinkable water, basic instruction and elementary health care" (*Caritas in Veritate*, 43).

12. Another area calling for study is that of the new technologies described as "emergent" and "convergent." These include information and communication technologies, biotechnologies, nanotechnologies and robotics. Relying on results obtained from physics, genetics and neuroscience, as well as on increasingly powerful computing capabilities, profound interventions on living organisms are now possible. Even the human body is subject to interventions capable of modifying not only its functions and capabilities, but also its ways of relating on personal and societal levels, with the result that it is increasingly exposed to market forces. There is a pressing need, then, to understand these epochal changes and new frontiers in order to determine how to place them at the service of the human person, while respecting and promoting the intrinsic dignity of all. This task is extremely demanding, given its complexity and the unpredictability of future developments; consequently, it requires even greater discernment than usual. We can define this discernment as "a sincere work of conscience, in its effort to know the possible good on the basis of which to engage responsibly in the correct exercise of practical reason" (SYNOD OF BISHOPS ON YOUNG PEOPLE, *Final Document* [27 October 2018], 109). This process of research and evaluation thus entails the workings of the moral conscience and, for the believer, is part of his or her relationship with the Lord Jesus, in the desire to put on the mind of Christ in our actions and choices (cf. *Phil* 2:5).

13. The kind of medicine, economy, technology and politics that develop within the modern city of man must also, and above all, remain subject to the judgment rendered by the peripheries of the earth. Indeed, the many extraordinary resources made available to human beings by scientific and technological research could overshadow the joy of fraternal sharing and the beauty of common undertakings, unless they find their meaning in advancing that joy and beauty. We should keep in mind that fraternity remains the unkept promise of modernity. The universal spirit of fraternity that grows by mutual trust – within modern civil society and between peoples and nations – appears much weakened. The strengthening of fraternity, generated in the human family by the worship of God in spirit and truth, is the new frontier of Christianity. Every detail of the life of the body and of the soul, in which the love and redemptive power of the new creation shine forth within us, leads to amazement before the miracle of a resurrection in the very process of occurring (cf. *Col* 3:1-2). May the Lord grant that we multiply these miracles! May the witness of Saint Francis of Assisi, who saw himself as the brother of every creature on earth and in heaven, inspire us by its perennial relevance. May the Lord prepare you for

this new phase of your mission, your lamps filled with the oil of the Spirit to light your path and to guide your steps. How beautiful indeed are the feet of those who bring the joyful proclamation of God's love for the life of all those who dwell upon our land (cf. *Is* 52: 7; *Rom* 10:15).

From the Vatican, 6 January 2019

FRANCIS
