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Audience with directors and employees of the Association of Italian Ecclesiastical Museums

At 11.50 this morning, in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the directors and employees of the Association of Italian Ecclesiastical Museums. The Association, promoter of cultural events, guided tours to places of historic and cultural interest, and conventions on related themes, has the mission of visibly documenting the path taken over the course of the centuries by the Church in worship, in catechism, in culture and in charity.

The following is the address prepared for the event, handed by the Pope to the president of the Association, adding a few impromptu remarks in which he stated that he wished to greet all those present at the audience one by one.

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I welcome you, starting with the President, whom I thank for the words with which she introduced our meeting; to the board of directors, to the director of the CEI national office for ecclesiastical cultural heritage and buildings of worship and to all of you, dear operators and operators, who for various reasons lend your service, even as volunteers, to museums in the dioceses or religious institutes in Italy.

The history of your Association demonstrates the response to the need to coordinate and bring into dialogue the numerous and varied museums, large and small, that are present in Italy and, thanks to God, are constantly growing. In fact, ecclesiastical museums share the same mission: to document “visibly the path taken by the Church over the centuries in worship, catechesis, culture and charity” (*Circular letter on the pastoral function of ecclesiastical museums*, 2001).

In the Encyclical *Laudato si'* I recalled that historical, artistic and cultural heritage, together with natural heritage, is equally threatened. It forms part of the common identity of a place and a base for building a habitable city. It is

necessary to integrate the history, culture and architecture of a particular place, safeguarding its original identity, and enabling dialogue between technical and popular language. It is culture understood not only as the monuments of the past, but above all in its living, dynamic and participatory sense (see ni. 143). For this reason it is essential that the museum maintains good relations with the territory in which it is inserted, collaborating with other similar institutions. It is about helping people to live together, to live well together, to work together. Ecclesiastical museums, by their nature, are called to foster encounter and dialogue in the territorial community. From this perspective it is normal to collaborate with museums of other religious communities. The works of art and the memory of different traditions and lifestyles speak of that humanity that makes us brothers and sisters.

The museum contributes to the good quality of life of the people, creating open spaces for relationships between people, places of closeness, and opportunities to create communities. In large centres it is presented as a cultural offering and representation of the history of that place. In small cities it raises the awareness of an identity that “makes one feel at home”. It always helps everyone to lift their eye to beauty. Urban spaces and people’s lives need museums that allow them to enjoy this beauty as an expression of lives, their harmony with the environment, encounter and mutual help (see *Laudato si’*, 150).

I know well that for you this work is a passion: passion for culture, history, art, to know and to safeguard; passion for the people of your lands, in whose service you place your professionalism. And also passion for the Church and its mission. The museums in which you operate represent the face of the Church, its artistic and artisan fruitfulness, its vocation to communicate a message that is Good News. A message not for a select few, but for everyone. Everyone has the right to beautiful culture! Especially the poorest and the last, who must enjoy it as a gift from God. Your museums are ecclesial places and you participate in the pastoral care of your communities by presenting the beauty of human creative processes intended to express the Glory of God. In doing so you cooperate with the various diocesan offices, and also with parishes and schools.

I congratulate you for being attentive to formation, for guaranteeing an up-to-date general preparation also at ecclesiastical study centres, as well as specific preparation in the various sectors of competence. I am thinking, for example, of the course held this year at the Pontifical Gregorian University, as well as the grass-roots work of information and communication regarding museums through the media, training days and contributions to specialized magazines. I also encourage the initiatives you carry out alongside archives and libraries, joining your professional fields and your passion. Together we sometimes go more slowly, but surely we go further!

Many of you are dedicated to dialogue with contemporary artists, promoting meetings, creating exhibitions, training people in today’s languages. It is a labour of wisdom and openness, not always appreciated; it is a “frontier” task, indispensable for continuing the dialogue that the Church has always had with artists. Contemporary art incorporates the languages to which young people are especially accustomed. We cannot lack this expression and sensitivity in our museums, through skilled research on motivations, content and relationships. New people can also approach sacred contemporary art, which can be an important place for comparison and dialogue with today’s culture.

Dear friends, I extend to you the invitation I made to the whole Church in Italy to walk on the path I outlined with the Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*. And I also think that the more recent Exhortation on the subject of holiness – *Gaudete et exsultate* – concerns you in a particular way, because ecclesiastical museums are also a form of resonance of the holiness of the People of God. This perspective is fascinating! But first of all it reminds us that we are all called to become saints, within the holy faithful People of God. Holiness is the truest beauty of the Church. A beauty that gives meaning and full value to your service to the Church and in the Church, which appreciates and thanks you. For this I bless you and encourage you. And you, too, please pray for me.
