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Audience of the Holy Father to the Roman Curia on the occasion of the presentation of Christmas wishes

This morning, in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the cardinals and superiors of the Roman Curia for the presentation of Christmas wishes.

During the meeting, the Pope gave the following address to the Roman Curia:

Address of the Holy Father

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14)

Dear brothers and sisters,

I offer all of you a cordial welcome. I express my gratitude to Cardinal Angelo Sodano for his kind words and in a particular way I thank him, also in the name of the members of the College of Cardinals, for the valued service he has long provided as Dean, in a spirit of helpfulness, dedication and efficiency, and with great skill in organization and coordination. In the manner of "*la rassa nostrana*", as the Piedmontese writer Nino Costa would say. Now the Cardinal Bishops have to elect a new dean. I am hoping they will elect someone who can carry this important responsibility full time. Thank you.

To each of you here, to your co-workers and all those who serve in the Curia, but also to the Papal Representatives and their staff, I extend my best wishes for a holy and joyful Christmas. And I add my appreciation for the dedication that you bring daily to your service of the Church. Thank you very much.

Once again this year, the Lord gives us the opportunity to gather for this moment of fellowship which strengthens our fraternity and is grounded in our contemplation of God's love revealed at Christmas. A contemporary mystic has written that "the birth of Christ is the greatest and most eloquent witness of how much God loved man. He

loved him with a personal love. That is why he took a human body, united it to himself and made it his own forever. The birth of Christ is itself a 'covenant of love', sealed for all time between God and man".[1] As Saint Clement of Alexandria writes, "Christ came down and assumed our humanity, willingly sharing in our human sufferings, for this reason: so that, having experienced the frailty of those whom he loves, he could then make us experience his great power".[2]

In the light of this boundless benevolence and love, our exchange of Christmas greetings is yet another chance to respond to Christ's new commandment: "Even as I have loved you, you must also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (*Jn 13:34-35*). Jesus does not ask us to love him in response to his love for us; rather, he asks us to love one another as he does. In other words, he asks us to become like him, since he became like us. As Saint John Henry Newman prayed: "May each Christmas, as it comes, find us more and more like Him, who at this time became a little child for our sake, more simple-minded, more humble, more holy, more affectionate, more resigned, more happy, more full of God".[3] And he went on to say: "[Christmas] is a time for innocence, and purity, and gentleness, and mildness, and contentment, and peace"[4].

This mention of Newman brings to mind his well-known words in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, a book that coincided chronologically and spiritually with his entry into the Catholic Church: "Here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often".[5] Naturally, he is not speaking about changing for change's sake, or following every new fashion, but rather about the conviction that development and growth are a normal part of human life, even as believers we know that God remains the unchanging centre of all things.[6]

For Newman *change* was *conversion*, in other words, interior transformation.[7] Christian life is a journey, a pilgrimage. The history of the Bible is a journey, marked by constantly new beginnings. So it was with Abraham. So it was too with those Galileans who two thousand years ago set out to follow Jesus: "When they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him" (*Lk 5:11*). From that time forward, the history of God's people – the history of the Church – has always been marked by new beginnings, displacements and changes. This journey, of course, is not just geographical, but above all symbolic: it is a summons to discover the movement of the heart, which, paradoxically, has to set out in order to remain, to change in order to be faithful.[8]

All of this has particular importance for our time, because what we are experiencing is *not simply an epoch of changes, but an epochal change*. We find ourselves living at a time when change is no longer linear, but epochal. It entails decisions that rapidly transform our ways of living, of relating to one another, of communicating and thinking, of how different generations relate to one another and how we understand and experience faith and science. Often we approach change as if were a matter of simply putting on new clothes, but remaining exactly as we were before. I think of the enigmatic expression found in a famous Italian novel: "If we want everything to stay the same, then everything has to change" (*The Leopard* by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa).

The more healthy approach is to let oneself be challenged by the questions of the day and to approach them with the virtues of discernment, *parrhesía* and *hypomoné*. Seen in this light, change takes on a very different aspect: from something marginal, incidental or merely external, it would become something more *human* and more *Christian*. Change would still take place, but beginning with man as its centre: an *anthropological conversion*.[9]

We need to initiate processes and not just occupy spaces: "God manifests himself in historical revelation, in history. Time initiates processes and space crystalizes them. God is in history, in the processes. We must not focus on occupying the spaces where power is exercised, but rather on starting long-run historical processes. We must initiate processes rather than occupy spaces. God manifests himself in time and is present in the processes of history. This gives priority to actions that give birth to new historical dynamics. And it requires patience, waiting".[10] In this sense, we are urged to read the signs of the times with the eyes of faith, so that the direction of this change should "raise new and old questions which it is right that we should face".[11]

In discussing a change that is grounded mainly in fidelity to the *depositum fidei* and the Tradition, today I would like to speak once more of the implementation of the *reform* of the Roman Curia and to reaffirm that this reform has never presumed to act as if nothing had preceded it. On the contrary, an effort was made to enhance the good elements deriving from the complex history of the Curia. There is a need to respect history in order to build a future that has solid roots and can thus prove fruitful. Appealing to memory is not the same as being anchored in self-preservation, but instead to evoke the life and vitality of an ongoing process. Memory is not static, but dynamic. By its very nature, it implies movement. Nor is tradition static; it too is dynamic, as that great man [Gustav Mahler] used to say: tradition is the guarantee of the future and not a container of ashes.

Dear brothers and sisters,

In our previous Christmas meetings, I spoke of the criteria that inspired this work of reform. I also explained some changes already implemented, whether definitively or *ad experimentum*.^[12] In 2017, I highlighted some new elements in the organization of the Curia. I gave as examples: the Third Section of the Secretariat of State, which is working very well; the relationship between the Roman Curia and particular Churches, with reference also to the ancient practice of the Visits *ad limina Apostolorum*; and the structure of some Dicasteries, especially that for the Oriental Churches and those for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, particularly with Judaism.

In today's meeting, I would like to reflect on some other Dicasteries, beginning with the heart of the reform, that is, with the first and most important task of the Church, which is *evangelization*. As Saint Paul VI stated: "Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize".^[13] Today too, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* continues to be the most important pastoral document of the post-conciliar period. Indeed, the aim of the current *reform* is that "the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 27). Consequently, inspired by the magisterium of the Successors of Peter from the time of the Second Vatican Council until the present, it was decided to give the title *Praedicate Evangelium* to the new Apostolic Constitution being prepared on the reform of the Roman Curia. A missionary outlook.

For this reason, I would like to discuss today some of the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia whose names explicitly refer to this: the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* and the *Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples*. I think, too, of the *Dicastery for Communication* and the *Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development*.

The first two Congregations mentioned were established in an age when it was easier to distinguish between two rather well-defined realities: a Christian world and a world yet to be evangelized. That situation no longer exists today. People who have not yet received the Gospel message do not live only in non-Western continents; they live everywhere, particularly in vast urban concentrations that call for a specific pastoral outreach. In big cities, we need other "maps", other paradigms, which can help us reposition our ways of thinking and our attitudes. Brothers and sisters, *Christendom no longer exists!* Today we are no longer the only ones who create culture, nor are we in the forefront or those most listened to.^[14] We need a change in our pastoral mindset, which does not mean moving towards a relativistic pastoral care. We are no longer living in a Christian world, because faith – especially in Europe, but also in a large part of the West – is no longer an evident presupposition of social life; indeed, faith is often rejected, derided, marginalized and ridiculed.

This point was clearly made by Benedict XVI when he proclaimed the 2012 *Year of Faith*: "Whereas in the past it was possible to recognize a unitary cultural matrix, broadly accepted in its appeal to the content of the faith and the values inspired by it, today this no longer seems to be the case in large swathes of society, because of a profound crisis of faith that has affected many people".^[15] This also led to the establishment in 2010 of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization for the sake of fostering "a renewed evangelization in the countries where the first proclamation of the faith has already resonated and where Churches with an ancient foundation exist but are experiencing the progressive secularization of society and a sort of 'eclipse of the sense of God', which pose a challenge to finding appropriate means to propose anew the

perennial truth of Christ's Gospel".[16] At times I have spoken about this with some of you... I think of five countries that filled the world with missionaries – I told you which ones they are – and today lack the vocational resources to go forward. That is today's world.

The realization that epochal change raises serious questions about the identity of our faith did not burst suddenly on the scene.[17] It gave rise to the term "new evangelization", then taken up by Saint John Paul II, who wrote in his Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*: "Today the Church must face other challenges and push forward to new frontiers, both in the initial mission *ad gentes* and in the new evangelization of those peoples who have already heard Christ proclaimed" (No. 30). What is needed is a new evangelization or a re-evangelization (cf. No. 33).

All of this necessarily entails changes and shifts in focus, both within the above-mentioned Dicasteries and within the Curia as a whole.[18]

I would also add a word about the recently established *Dicastery for Communication*. Here too we are speaking of epochal change, inasmuch as "broad swathes of humanity are immersed in [the digital world] in an ordinary and continuous manner. It is no longer merely a question of 'using' instruments of communication, but of living in a highly digitalized culture that has had a profound impact on ideas of time and space, on our self-understanding, our understanding of others and the world, and our ability to communicate, learn, be informed and enter into relationship with others. An approach to reality that privileges images over listening and reading has influenced the way people learn and the development of their critical sense" (*Christus Vivit*, 86).

The Dicastery for Communication has been entrusted with the responsibility of unifying in a new institution the nine bodies that, in various ways and with different tasks, had previously dealt with communications. These were the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, the Holy See Press Office, the Vatican Press, the Vatican Publishing House, *L'Osservatore Romano*, Vatican Radio, the Vatican Television Centre, the Vatican Internet Service and the Photographic Service. This consolidation, as I have said, was meant not simply for better coordination, but also for a reconfiguration of the different components in view of offering a better product and keeping to a consistent editorial line.

The new media culture, in its variety and complexity, calls for an appropriate presence of the Holy See in the communications sector. Today, we are living in a multimedia world and this affects our way of conceiving, designing and providing media services. All this entails not only a change of culture but also an institutional and personal conversion, in order to pass from operating in self-contained units – which in the best cases had a certain degree of coordination – to working in synergy, in an intrinsically interconnected way.

Dear brothers and sisters,

Much of what I have been saying is also applicable to the *Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development*. It too was recently established in response to the changes that have taken place on the global level, and amalgamates four previous Pontifical Councils: those of Justice and Peace, *Cor Unum*, and the pastoral care of Migrants and of Healthcare Workers. The overall unity of the tasks entrusted to this Dicastery is summed up in the first words of the Motu Proprio *Humanam Progressionem* that instituted it: "In all her being and actions, the Church is called to promote the integral development of the human person in the light of the Gospel. This development takes place by attending to the inestimable goods of justice, peace and the care of creation". It takes place by serving those who are most vulnerable and marginalized, particularly those forced to emigrate, who at the present time represent a voice crying in the wilderness of our humanity. The Church is thus called to remind everyone that it is not simply a matter of social or migration questions but of human persons, of our brothers and sisters who today are a symbol of all those discarded by the globalized society. She is called to testify that for God no one is a "stranger" or an "outcast". She is called to awaken consciences slumbering in indifference to the reality of the Mediterranean Sea, which has become for many, all too many, a cemetery.

I would like to recall how important it is that development be *integral*. Saint Paul VI observed that "to be authentic, development must be integral; it must foster the development of every man and of the whole man"

(*Populorum Progressio*, 14). In a word, grounded in her tradition of faith and appealing in recent decades to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, the Church consistently affirms the grandeur of the vocation of all human beings, whom God has created in his image and likeness in order to form a single family. At the same time, she strives to embrace humanity in all its dimensions.

It is precisely this *integral* aspect that nowadays makes us recognize that *our common humanity unites us as children of one Father*. "In all her being and actions, the Church is called to promote the integral development of the human person in the light of the Gospel (*Humanam Progressionem*). The Gospel always brings the Church back to the mysterious logic of the incarnation, to Christ who took upon himself our history, the history of each of us. That is the message of Christmas. Humanity, then, is the key for interpreting the *reform*. Humanity calls and challenges us; in a word, it summons us to go forth and not fear change.

Let us not forget that the Child lying in the manger has the face of our brothers and sisters most in need, of the poor who "are a privileged part of this mystery; often they are the first to recognize God's presence in our midst" (*Admirabile Signum*, 6).

Dear brothers and sisters,

We are speaking, then, about great challenges and necessary balances that are often hard to achieve, for the simple fact that, poised between a glorious past and a changing, creative future, we are living in the present. Here there are persons who necessarily need time to grow; there are historical situations to be dealt with on a daily basis, since in the process of the *reform* the world and history do not stop; there are juridical and institutional questions that need to be resolved gradually, without magic formulas or shortcuts.

There is, finally, the dimension of time and there is human error, which must rightly be taken into consideration. These are part of the history of each one of us. Not to take account of them is to go about doing things in abstraction from human history. Linked to this difficult historical process there is always the temptation to fall back on the past (also by employing new formulations), because it is more reassuring, familiar, and, to be sure, less conflictual. This too is part of the process and risk of setting in motion significant changes.[19]

Here, there is a need to be wary of the temptation to *rigidity*. A rigidity born of the fear of change, which ends up erecting fences and obstacles on the terrain of the common good, turning it into a minefield of incomprehension and hatred. Let us always remember that behind every form of rigidity lies some kind of imbalance. Rigidity and imbalance feed one another in a vicious circle. And today this temptation to rigidity has become very real.

Dear brothers and sisters,

The Roman Curia is not a body detached from reality, even though this risk is always present. Rather, it should be thought of and experienced in the context of the journey of today's men and women, and against the backdrop of this epochal change. The Roman Curia is not a palace or a wardrobe full of clothes to be changed. The Roman Curia is a living body, and all the more so to the extent that it lives the Gospel in its integrity.

Cardinal Martini, in his last interview, a few days before his death, said something that should make us think: "The Church is two hundred years behind the times. Why is she not shaken up? Are we afraid? Fear, instead of courage? Yet faith is the Church's foundation. Faith, confidence, courage... Only love conquers weariness".[20]

Christmas is the feast of God's love for us. The divine love that inspires, guides and corrects change, and overcomes the human fear of leaving behind "security" in order once more to embrace the "mystery".

A happy Christmas to all!

In preparation for Christmas, we have listened to sermons on the Holy Mother of God. Let us turn to her before the blessing.

[*Hail Mary and blessing*].

Now I would like to give you a little gift of two books. The first is the “document” that I wanted to issue for the Extraordinary Missionary Month [October 2019], and did do in the form of an interview; *Senza di Lui non possiamo fare nulla – Without Him We Can Do Nothing*. I was inspired by a saying, I don’t know by whom, that when missionaries arrive in a place, the Holy Spirit is already there waiting for them. That was the inspiration for this document. The second gift is a retreat given to priests recently by Father Luigi Maria Epicoco, *Qualcuno a cui guardare – Someone To Whom We Can Look*. I give you these from the heart so that they can be of use to the whole community. Thank you!

[1] MATTA EL MESKEEN, *L’Umanità di Dio*, Qiqajon-Bose, Magnano 2015, 170-171.

[2] *Quis dives salvetur* 37, 1-6.

[3] Sermon 7, “The Mystery of Godliness”, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, V.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Chapter 1, Section 1, Part 7.

[6] In one of his prayers, Newman writes: “There is nothing stable but Thou, O my God! And Thou art the centre and life of all who change, who trust Thee as their Father, who look to Thee, and who are content to put themselves into Thy hands. I know, O my God, I must change, if I am to see Thy face!” (*Meditations and Devotions*, XI, “God Alone Unchangeable”).

[7] Newman describes it like this: “I was not conscious to myself, on my conversion, of any change, intellectual or moral, wrought in my mind... it was like coming into port after a rough sea; and my happiness on that score remains to this day without interruption” (*Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, 1865, Chapter 5, 238. Cf. J. HONORÉ, *Gli aforismi di Newman*, LEV, 2010, 167).

[8] Cf. J. M. BERGOGLIO, “Lenten Message to Priests and Religious”, 21 February 2007, in *In Your Eyes I See my Words: Homilies and Speeches from Buenos Aires, Volume 2: 2005-2008*, Fordham University Press, 2020.

[9] Cf. Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* (27 December 2017), 3: “In a word, this calls for changing the models of global development and redefining our notion of progress. Yet the problem is that we still lack the culture necessary to confront this crisis. We lack leadership capable of striking out on new paths”.

[10] Interview given to Father Antonio Spadaro, *Città Cattolica*, 19 September 2013, p.468.

[11] *Schreiben an das Pilgernde Volk Gottes in Deutschland*, 29 June 2019.

[12] Cf. *Address to the Curia*, 22 December 2016.

[13] Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (8 December 1975), 14. Saint John Paul II wrote that missionary evangelization “is the primary service which the Church can render to every individual and to all humanity in the modern world, a world which has experienced marvellous achievements but which seems to have lost its sense of ultimate realities and of existence itself” (Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, 7 December 1990, 2).

[14] Cf. *Address to Participants at the International Pastoral Congress on the World’s Big Cities*, Consistory Hall, 27 November 2014.

[15] Motu Proprio *Porta Fidei*, 2.

[16] Benedict XVI, *Homily*, 28 June 2010; cf. Motu Proprio *Ubi Cumque et Semper*, 17 October 2010.

[17] An epochal change was noted in France by Cardinal Suhard (we can think of his pastoral letter *Essor ou déclin de l'Église*, 1947) and by the then-Archbishop of Milan, Giovanni Battista Montini. The latter also questioned whether Italy was still a Catholic country (cf. *Opening Address at the VIII National Week of Pastoral Updating*, 22 September 1958, in *Discorsi e Scritti milanesi 1954-1963*, vol. II, Brescia-Roma 1997, 2328).

[18] Saint Paul VI, some fifty years ago, when presenting the new Roman Missal to the faithful, recalled the correspondence between the law of prayer (*lex orandi*) and the law of faith (*lex credendi*), and described the Missal as "a demonstration of fidelity and vitality". He concluded by saying: "So let us not speak of a 'new Mass', but rather of 'a new age in the life of the Church'" (*General Audience*, 19 November 1969). Analogously, we might also say in this case: *not a new Roman Curia, but rather a new age*.

[19] *Evangelii Gaudium* states the rule: "to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events. Without anxiety, but with clear convictions and tenacity" (No. 223).

[20] Interview with Georg Sporschill, S.J. and Federica Radice Fossati Confalonieri: *Corriere della Sera*, 1 September 2012.
