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Press Conference for the Presentation of the Holy Father Francis' Message for Lent 2021

At 11.30 this morning, in live streaming from the "John Paul II" Hall of the Holy See Press Office, a press conference was held to present the Holy Father Francis' Message for Lent 2021, entitled "*Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem*" (Mt 20: 18). *Lent: a Time for Renewing Faith, Hope and Love.*

The speakers were: His Eminence Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development; Msgr. Bruno-Marie Duffé, secretary of the same Dicastery; and Dr. Marcela Szymanski, editor in chief of the report "Religious Freedom in the World", published by the Pontifical Foundation "Aid to the Church in Need" (ACN), in live link-up from Brussels.

The following are their interventions:

Intervention of Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson

The Holy Father's Message for LENT bears the title, "*Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem....*", and it send me to the passage in Matthew's Gospel, where I read: While Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way Behold we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of man will be handed over to the Chief Priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised" (Mt 20:17-19)

Jesus predicts what will happen to him in Jerusalem after he had drawn his twelve disciples apart from the crowd, as if he wanted to communicate to them a reserved piece of information. It was about the final phase of his mission and life on earth, which he, however, wanted to leave to the twelve disciples as legacy. He wanted them to share in it; and we shall see, Jesus' legacy to his followers becomes a invitation to imitate his *poverty and self-abasement, his charity and love of his followers, his faith, his hope and his prayer life.*

Placed under this title, "*behold, we are going up to Jerusalem*, the Pope's lenten message evokes the cultic and

social tradition of God's people in the Bible, according to which "*going up to Jerusalem*" entailed a pilgrimage to God's house, as the destination. It entailed going up to Mt. Zion, the place that God has chosen to make his name dwell (Dt.12:11). It is where God is worshipped; and it from there that God teaches his people his ways. This is where the prophet Isaiah prophesied that all nations would come to be taught the ways of God and to learn to walk in his path (Is.2:3ff.).

This time, however, when Jesus goes up to Jerusalem with his disciples, the destination will be another mount: *Golgotha*, and it will be where God would reveal his love for humanity and pour out on humanity the Spirit of his Son: the Spirit of the *firstborn of many brothers*, the Spirit of children of God, and therefore, of our common fraternity.

On that occasion, Jesus from the cross would teach his followers, as from the new Temple on another hill the following lessons:

- the lesson of *obedient faith* with which Jesus embraced his passion and cross.
- the lesson of *poverty: the poverty of self-emptying and of becoming a slave*, in order to serve and to enrich humanity from his poverty (Phil.2:6-8; Mt.20:28; Jn.13:4-12).
- the lesson of *love: the love of the Father for his Son and for the world* (Jn.3:16), Jesus' love for his Father (Jn.10:17-18), as well as his love for his followers (Jn.13:1).
- the lesson of *prayer* with which Jesus began his agony in Gethsemane, with which he prayed for his crucifiers and with which he commended himself into the hands of the Father.
- the lesson of *hope* in his resurrection, which he would promise also to the repentant thief (Lk.23:41-42).

Under the title, "*Behold we are going up to Jerusalem*", then, Pope Francis' message for Lent 2021 gathers and arranges the lessons of the passion, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus into a triad of theological virtues: *faith*, *hope* and *charity*, and a triad of lenten exercises: *self-impoverishment* (as in fasting and abstinence), *prayer* and *charity/almsgiving*. These two triads are woven together into forming the Pope's message this year; and, as you can see, they are virtues and exercise which Jesus himself lived and handed on to his followers to be lived also: *to make them more Christ-like!* With his lenten message, Pope Francis recommends the same virtues and exercises, which Jesus taught his disciples, to us for a our lenten journey to the feast of the resurrection of Jesus at Easter 2021.

a) Our lenten message this year begins with an invitation to let the Word of Scripture teach us about the truth of Jesus: Son of God, who for our sake emptied himself to become a slave, so as to reveal the Father's love for us. In life, we empty ourselves, when we give up what we cherish and what we so identify with as to believe that we cannot live without them. Such *self-emptying* is called *self denial* and it is the spirit of *fasting* and all forms of *abstinence*. We give up time of watching TV, so we can go to Church, pray or say a rosary. It is only through self-denial that we discipline ourselves to be able to take the gaze off ourselves and to recognize the other, reckon with his needs and thus create access to benefits and goods for people: respect their dignity and rights ... etc. Making room for the other is recognizing the existence (dignity) of the other: as another "self" /person like me, hence a *brother/sister* all of us children on the one God and Father of our *confession*.....*Faith*.

b) To the extent that what we give up through self-denial or abstinence benefits the other, our fasting contributes to promoting the *common good*: the resultant wellbeing of humanity, which at the time of self-denial may be veiled from our eyes, and can only be *hoped in*.. To hope is to talk about the future; and to talk about the future is to talk about God. Rooted in *faith*, *hope* generates energy, which stimulates the intellect and gives the will all its dynamism.. It makes us redouble our activity, and there cannot be a better attitude in these periods of trial (climate and covid-19). Lent, as a period for living the theological virtue of *hope*, disposes us to seek the face of the God of our future in prayer. Through *prayer and communion* with God, we derive inspiration and an inner light

to become dreamers and visionaries of a better future: of time made new by God's grace and the conversion of all of us.

c) When *hope* (in God and his grace) *stimulates the intellect and gives the will all of its dynamism*, they manifest themselves in going out of one's self to share and to promote the wellbeing of all: in charity. For it is when human activity is inspired and sustained by love/charity that it anticipates God's kingdom on earth. And we may recap here the vision of all lenten exercises: It will not be simply repeating St. Augustine to say that one needs a spirituality of love to show love. The point made by *Fratelli tutti* is that our "social love" and a consequent "civilization of love" must be rooted in and be a fruit of our spiritual love (love of God). The inwardly must be what supports the outwardly. Thus, as Pope Francis observes (*Laudato si*): it is the violence that is within our hearts which manifests itself in the abuses of nature. Accordingly, let us endeavour to cultivate within us love, in order to be able to show forth "social love." This is our lenten project!...May god help us with it!!"

Intervention of Msgr. Bruno-Marie Duffé

The Holy Father's message for the time of Lent reminds all Christians that this particular time of the year is a time of renewal and conversion, centred on the memory of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ in which we are immersed. This is why we are invited, during these forty days, to follow the path of Christ so that on Easter evening we may be able to renew the promise of our Baptism.

In chapter 20 of the Gospel according to St Matthew, we read the words of Christ: "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem": this city which concentrates within itself the memory of the Covenant, the wounds of a complex human history and the expectation of the fulfilment of the message of the prophets.

Today we are called to walk the way with Christ towards a new life and a new world, towards a new trust in God and in the future, in a context marked by anxiety, doubt and sometimes even despair. We know that the health crisis of Covid-19 is causing a social crisis in which many people are going through a time of passion and death.

How can we live this time of Lent in the footsteps of Christ, renewing ourselves in faith, hope and brotherly love? How can we live with Christ and with those who suffer, this "crossing of death" and this "resurrection" that associates us with the very life of Christ and the love of God the Father?

The call to live fasting, prayer and almsgiving, as Jesus presents them in his preaching, says the Message of the Holy Father, «are the conditions and expressions of our conversion. «The path of poverty and self-denial (fasting), concern and loving care for the poor (almsgiving), and childlike dialogue with the Father (prayer) make it possible for us to live lives of sincere faith, living hope and effective charity». (Introduction of the Message).

Fasting opens our spirit, body and whole being to the gift of God. By breaking with an egocentric lifestyle and excessive, even compulsive consumption, we consent to live a poverty that is an openness to others and to God. And we receive a love that comes to us from the Father and from Christ.

Lent is "a time to believe", that is, to allow ourselves to be touched by God and let him "establish his dwelling place in us" (cf. Jn 14:23).

Fasting, therefore, consists in freeing our existence from what encumbers it, from the overload of things, useful and useless, from true or false information, from the habits and dependencies that bind us, to open the door of our hearts and minds to the One who comes to share our human condition until death: Jesus, the Son of the living God.

In recollection and silent prayer, hope is given to us as an inner light, to illuminate the choices we are called to make, the mission and the responsibilities entrusted to us.

Prayer is a breath by which we allow the Spirit to fill our inner life and energise it, with the two movements of receiving and giving.

Lent is a time to pray, simply naming those whom life places on our path and hoping with them. Through this experience of personal prayer - but always open to the Other and to others - we are given the inspiration to comfort, console, encourage, and offer our loved ones solicitude and forgiveness. And this extends to those who are far away or in solitude.

Almsgiving is the act by which we express our compassion and charity. Charity is indeed the impulse of the heart that makes us come out of ourselves, to make us close to the wounded, despised, homeless, needy person...

As the Holy Father clearly expresses in the Encyclical "Fratelli tutti": «Charity, with its impulse to universality, is capable of building a new world. No mere sentiment, it is the best means of discovering effective paths of development for everyone» (n°183).

Lent is a time for giving: what we have, what we know, what we are. Through the experience of giving, we consider the one in need as a member of our own family, as a brother, as a friend whom we love. The little that we share with love becomes much and never runs out: it becomes a reserve of life and simple joy.

Lent therefore opens up a path of conversion in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus himself, who lived out his mission as Son to the end and whom God raised up on Easter morning. This is our faith: it is a hope offered to every living person, beyond suffering and death. He has in his hands and on his body the traces of our injustices and our pain, but he stands before us and calls us to a new life.

Intervention of Dr. Marcela Szymanski

In behalf of those persecuted for their faith, I want to thank you very much for this opportunity to share their testimony, linking them to the important message of Pope Francis for Lent this year. To those who suffer the ordeal of persecution, the pandemic has represented a moment of communion in pain and loss, regrettably occurring all over the world.

Pain brings us closer to one another, and through faith one receives the "living water" described by the Holy Father. A recently published poll by the Pew Research Center shows that, in most Western countries, religious feeling has increased during the pandemic. We should not close our eyes to that.

And, therefore, here I am today, with my hat of Editor-in-Chief of the report "Religious Freedom in the World", published by Aid to the Church in Need. The report will be presented to you here on April 20th, but in the meantime I get to hear and read stories of faith, love and hope under various degrees of persecution. The example of those who would rather die than renounce their faith is unforgettable and hard to comprehend, it is like a dialogue where one of the parties seems to be fully charged with hatred and the other one appears fully protected by a strong layer of Love.

When I hear the stories of those oppressed and my eyes cannot get any bigger, they tell me "But Marcela, please, when you speak about us, ask them to pray for us! We want to be like you, to be able to read the Bible whenever we want, to go to temples that are open all day, to celebrate Christmas like you do!" Then comes to me the vision of dusty Bibles on shelves, the closed Churches, the strange Christmas that we lived recently... And I have to answer to them: "No, I will not pray for you to be like us, but for us to be like you! I and my neighbors would like to have your strong faith and hope in the future, and the strength to keep giving to others".

The Pope's message today tells us exactly that, but I wanted to show you a picture to their stories, I have so

many photographs! But I chose a portrait of a family, because the family is where we learn to live the virtues the Holy Father explains to us. This image I chose is a Christian family of Aleppo. This is a drawing by the 11 year-old daughter. The teacher asked her to show us what she had survived in September 2016, when the Islamic terrorists of Al-Nusra were imposing their rule in the city. Please take a good look. This is a family under severe persecution because of the faith of their tormentors.

The artist is here, this is her mother, her sister and her brother, already dead on the floor, and with signs of torture. Three Al-Nusra terrorists, clad in black as they do. There are torture instruments including electric shock equipment, guns, grenades, knives. The terrorists were looking to take all the men and boys with them. The women, were expected to renounce their faith and become Muslim.

They only survived because the army arrived in time, and the terrorists fled. This family were generous to share with us their experience, because they firmly believe that God was with them there, or else... they would have all died. The family today is back to a "normal" life by Aleppo standards, working at the kindergarden.

This "family portrait", ladies and gentlemen, was drawn only 2200 km from Rome, the same distance by car to the south of Spain. That is how close Aleppo is to Rome.

What can we learn for Lent, from such a family, who went through a cruel Calvary but consider themselves "resurrected" in Christ? What would we tell them, if we met them today?

We have heard it often from the Holy Father that, "with the power of love, with meekness, one can fight against arrogance, violence and war, and one can bring about peace" for the entire Church.

The persecuted are the elite of the Church, and to serve them is not a duty but an honor.

The horrible image that I just showed you is proof that the road to Heaven through martyrdom is not like a film by Zeffirelli, and those witnesses, like the girl who drew it, remain in need of psychological support. But others, too, survived to tell of the fruits of their faith and prayer. Those fruits are pardon and love.

Not far from Aleppo, in Qaratayn, near Palmyra, Father Jacques Mourad, whom many of you met in Rome, was kidnapped together with 250 Christians by militants of the Islamic State. After three months of torture and demands to renounce their faith, much to their surprise, they were allowed to return to their homes. The reason they were given by the ISIS men was that "Christians had not taken weapons against the Muslims, and they did so because of their faith". To Father Mourad, and to us too, this was a miracle!

Then follows the long road to reconciliation, to obtain an enduring new relationship in peace and harmony, with that neighbor that caused you so much pain. It begins by feeling surrounded by the Love of God. That is the only fuel that moves to pardon the pain of losing children, mothers, all their possessions, their health, their plans... To this will to pardon, we must add the testimony of the "good people", who accompany you in this road to forgiveness.

My friend Silwanos was "good people". He never wanted to be an archbishop. He became one and brilliantly so, in the Syriac Orthodox Church. He died two months ago in Homs, Syria, the city that bears witness to his love of God and the others. He was 52 years old, died of cancer for lack of treatment. An orphan from a very young age, Silwanos was raised by religious Sisters, where he came to find his religious call, together with his brother. He worked tirelessly for the orphans of the region. Many remember his dark silhouette in the streets during the bombings, when he was looking for the children to bring them to safety. With or without bombings he never stopped providing foster care for them, and as soon as the bullets stopped, he reopened schools and new kindergardens. Right in the middle of the war, in 2017, he came to Brussels carrying large suitcases full of drawings by the children of Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus. The drawings were intended as letters to the politicians, asking them to increase humanitarian aid, and to show them what was their daily life. So... you know where this drawing came from. In another occasion, I could tell you of the insults and humiliations Silwanos

received from some European politicians. I was furious, but he had seen worse things in life. He promised to pray for them. He returned to Homs, where he served the poor until his very last breath.

Sacrifice goes together with deeply rooted love, the one that makes you reach out to your fellow brothers and sisters. During the first COVID lockdown in India, millions of workers were stranded without jobs or shelter for days, waiting for a little space in the train to go back home. A group called the "Small Christian Communities" network in India, which includes lay people and religious men and women, took it upon themselves to distribute food and water, as well as masks and disinfecting gel to those along the tracks. The members of these Small Christian Communities are as poor as the ones needing help, but they fully trust in the power of prayer and Providence. They organized prayers from home, but using megaphones to recite the litanies from the roof, so that those along the tracks could join them. We have to remember this: Hell trembles at the sound of the prayers of the poor!

And to deprive oneself of something, fasting, self-denial, says the Holy Father. Consider the many kidnapped priests and sisters in Africa, who are held for ransom by militias. They want the money to buy more weapons and continue kidnapping! So, the decision taken by the Nigerian bishops last week, together with the families of the victims, is not to pay ANY ransom for ANY of them. In a clear message to the terrorists, Archbishop Kaigama said: "Our children are NOT for sale!". Assuming that responsibility of not paying is a very heavy Cross. Our brothers in Nigeria are fasting of life, in the hope for another miracle like that of Father Mourad.

We have much to learn from them.

Are we maybe sitting on their Cross? We have to know they are ready to help us carry our Cross! With their life, prayer and death. Remember the family picture from Syria, let us not forget them, let us talk about them, let us bring their story to the Synod of Bishops; so that we can tell them one day that their long Calvary toward Resurrection was not in vain!

Thank you for your attention.
