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Press Release of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development on progress in the project to assess and improve WASH conditions in a selected number of Catholic health facilities

The Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development is pleased to provide an update on its WASH project (access to drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) in health care facilities belonging to the Catholic Church, developed by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development in collaboration with religious congregations, bishops, *Caritas Internationalis* and *Global Water 2020*. It was first announced last year, together with the Dicastery's publication of *"Aqua fons vitae"*. The importance of hygienic measures had become even more evident throughout the world because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Without clean water and hygiene procedures, billions of people are placed at risk.

In August 2020 the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development sent a letter to Bishops around the world, urging them to help ensure *"adequate access to water, sanitation and hygiene in all Catholic health care facilities in order to safely treat patients, prevent further spread of COVID-19 and other diseases, and protect health care workers and chaplains"*, and to lead their teams *"to respond to a desperate need in some of the health care facilities serving in isolated or impoverished areas of some dioceses"*. The letter reiterated how the Catholic Church has been a committed pioneer of healthcare around the world, irrespective of religion or nationality.

Among those who have been on the forefront of this commitment are the Brothers Hospitallers of Saint John of God, also known as *Fatebenefratelli* (400 social and health care centers, distributed across 52 countries). Fra. Angel López, Director of the Missions and International Cooperation Office of their General Curia, explains that *"water, in addition to being an irreplaceable resource of first necessity, for us is one of the most important and economical means to prevention and improvement of the health of people of all ages"*.

Bishops' conferences, dioceses, congregations and several Caritas have responded to the Dicastery's call. A detailed assessment is currently being conducted in approximately 150 Catholic healthcare facilities (from small dispensaries to hospitals) in 22 countries. Cost estimates are also being conducted to understand what has to be done and how much it would cost to sustainably improve WASH conditions and meet proper standards through infrastructure, equipment, maintenance and staff training. Mr. Aloysius John, Secretary General of *Caritas Internationalis*, considers that *"these initiatives will help prevent the spread of new diseases and ensure decent care for patients in health care facilities. All over the world, many local Caritas organizations run*

similar programs ensuring parishes, communities, health centers and schools have the means to protect the health of those they serve”.

The preliminary results of these assessments reveal an urgent need in some areas. Whilst the final report will be published later in the year, the Dicastery is working with partners and donors interested in this project. Mr. David Douglas, Principal of *Global Water 2020* and *Waterlines*, notes that *“new initiatives, such as the one now led by the Dicastery, are enabling tenacious WASH problems to be not only identified but resolved. The Vatican’s call to action is helping to extend safe and sustainable WASH, as well as inspiring other organizations and governments that run healthcare facilities”.*

The President of the World Union of Catholic Women’s Organisations (WUCWO), María Lía Zervino states: *“The Dicastery’s call is fundamental. The women members of WUCWO, working tirelessly at the grassroots level in the various continents, caring for disadvantaged families, the homeless and the elderly vulnerable to COVID-19, are witnesses to the dire need for safe drinking water, which was already lacking even before the pandemic in areas of high social risk. Without investment to ensure that the human right to safe drinking water is also available to the most needy, all efforts to educate about health care will be in vain”.*

Organizations interested in joining this initiative may contact the Dicastery. This initiative is connected to several ongoing commitments of the Dicastery regarding care for people and the planet, and especially for a COVID-recovery in responsibility and solidarity with the most vulnerable.
