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The Holy Father Francis opens the General States of Birth, an online initiative promoted by the Forum of Family Associations

This morning, the Holy Father Francis left Santa Marta and transferred by car to the *Auditorium della Conciliazione* in Rome to participate in the opening of the first edition of the *Stati Generali della Natalità*, the *General States of Birth*, an online initiative promoted by the Forum of Family Associations.

Upon his arrival, Pope Francis was welcomed by the president of the Auditorium, Dr. Francesco Carducci, the Prime Minister of the Italian Republic, Mario Draghi, and the national president of the Forum of Family Associations, Gigi De Palo. The Holy Father then greeted the authorities present and the participants at the meeting.

After the introductory greeting by President De Palo and the speech by the Prime Minister, the Pope delivered his address in the foyer of the Auditorium.

At the end, after greeting some families with children, the Holy Father left the Auditorium and returned to the Vatican.

The following is the Pope's address at the opening of the *General States of Birth*:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters

I cordially greet you and I am grateful to the President of the Forum of Family Associations, Gianluigi De Palo, for the invitation and for his words of introduction. I thank Dr Mario Draghi, President of the Government, for his clear and hopeful words. I would like to thank all of you who are reflecting today on the urgent issue of the birth rate, which is fundamental to reverse the current trend and get Italy moving again, starting with life, starting with

the human being. And it is good that you are doing this together, involving businesses, banks, culture, the media, sport and entertainment. In reality, there are many other people here with you: above all, there are the young people who dream. The data say that most young people want to have children. But their dreams of life, buds of rebirth for the country, clash with a demographic winter that is still cold and dark: only half of young people believe they will be able to have two children in their lifetime.

For years Italy has thus had the lowest number of births in Europe, in what is becoming the old continent no longer because of its glorious history, but because of its advanced age. This country of ours, where every year it is as if a city of over two hundred thousand inhabitants were disappearing, in 2020 reached the lowest number of births since national unity: not only because of Covid, but because of a continuous, progressive downward trend, an increasingly harsh winter.

Yet all this does not yet seem to have attracted general attention, which is focused on the present and the immediate. The President of the Republic reiterated the importance of the birth rate, which he defined as 'the most critical reference point of this season', saying that 'families are not the connective tissue of Italy, families are Italy' (*Audience with the Forum of Family Associations*, 11 February 2020). How many families in recent months have had to work overtime, dividing their homes between work and school, with parents acting as teachers, computer technicians, workers, psychologists! And how many sacrifices are required of grandparents, the true lifelines of families! But not only that: they are the memory that opens us up to the future.

For the future to be good, we must therefore take care of families, especially young families, who are beset by worries that risk paralysing their life plans. I am thinking of the uncertainty of work, of the fears caused by the increasingly unaffordable costs of raising children: these are fears that can swallow up the future, quicksand that can sink a society. I also think, with sadness, of women at work who are discouraged from having children or have to hide their pregnancies. How is it possible that a woman should feel ashamed of the most beautiful gift that life can offer? Not the woman, but society should be ashamed, because a society that does not welcome life stops living. Children are the hope that gives birth to a people! Finally, in Italy, a decision has been taken to turn into law an allowance, defined as unique and universal, for every child that is born. I express my appreciation to the authorities and hope that this allowance will meet the concrete needs of families, who have made and are making so many sacrifices, and will mark the start of social reforms that put children and families at the centre. If families are not at the centre of the present, there will be no future; but if families start again, everything will start again.

I would now like to look at this new start and offer you three thoughts that I hope will be useful in view of a hoped-for spring, which will lift us out of the demographic winter. The first thought revolves around the word *gift*. Every gift is received, and life is the first gift that each one of us received. No one can give it to himself. First of all there was a gift. It is a "before" that we forget in the course of our lives, always intent on looking towards the "after", to what we can do and have. But first of all we have received a gift and we are called to pass it on. And a child is the greatest gift for everyone and comes first. To a child, to every child, is attached this word: first. Just as a child is awaited and loved before he or she is born, so we must put children first if we are to see the light again after the long winter. Instead, "a decline in the birthrate, which leads to an ageing of the population, together with the relegation of the elderly to a sad and lonely existence, is a subtle way of stating that it is all about us, that our individual concerns are the only thing that matters" (Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, 19). We have forgotten the primacy of gift - the primacy of gift! -, the source code of common living. This has happened above all in the more affluent, more consumerist societies. Indeed, we see that where there are more things, there is often more indifference and less solidarity, more closure and less generosity. Let us help each other not to lose ourselves in the things of life, to rediscover life as the meaning of all things.

Let us help each other, dear friends, to rediscover the courage to give, the courage to choose life. There is a phrase from the Gospel that can help anyone, even those who do not believe, to direct their choices. Jesus says: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (*Mt* 6: 21). Where is our treasure, the treasure of our society? In the children or in finances? What attracts us, family or income? There must be the courage to choose what comes first, because that is where the heart is bound. The courage to choose life is creative, because it does not accumulate or multiply what already exists, but opens up to novelty, to surprises: every human life is a true novelty, which knows no before and after in history. We have all received this unrepeatably gift and the

talents we have serve to pass on, from generation to generation, the first gift of God, the gift of life.

This “handing down” links to the second thought I would like to offer you. It revolves around the word *sustainability*, a key word for building a better world. We often talk about economic, technological and environmental sustainability and so on. But we also need to talk about generational sustainability. We will not be able to nurture production and preserve the environment if we do not pay attention to families and children. Sustainable growth comes from here. History teaches us this. During the phases of reconstruction following the wars that devastated Europe and the world over the past centuries, there was no restart without an explosion of births, without the ability to instil confidence and hope in the younger generations. We cannot follow short-sighted models of growth, as if a few hasty adjustments were the only thing needed to prepare for tomorrow. No, the dramatic birth rate and the frightening figures linked to the pandemic demand change and responsibility.

Sustainability rhymes with responsibility: it is the time for responsibility to make society flourish. Here, in addition to the primary role of the family, the school is fundamental. It cannot be a factory of notions to be poured over individuals; it must be the privileged time for encounter and human growth. At school one does not mature only through grades, but through the faces one encounters. And for young people it is essential to come into contact with lofty models that shape hearts as well as minds. In education, example is very important, and here I think also of the worlds of entertainment and sport. It is sad to see role models who only care about looking good, about being young and fit. Young people do not grow up thanks to the fireworks of appearance, they mature if attracted by those who have the courage to pursue big dreams, to sacrifice themselves for others, to do good to the world in which we live. And staying young does not come from taking selfies and retouching them, but from being able to look into the eyes of your children one day. Sometimes, however, the message goes out that fulfilment means making money and success, while children seem almost like a distraction, that should not hinder one's personal aspirations. This mentality is a gangrene in society and makes the future unsustainable.

Sustainability needs a soul, and this soul - the third word I propose - is *solidarity*. Just as we need generational sustainability, we need structural solidarity. The spontaneous and generous solidarity of many has enabled a lot of families to get by in these difficult times and to cope with growing poverty. However, we cannot remain in the realm of the emergency and the temporary, we need to give stability to family support structures and to encourage birth. We need a policy, an economy, information and culture that courageously promote birth.

First and foremost, there is a need for wide-ranging, far-sighted family policies: not based on the search for immediate consensus, but on the growth of the common good in the long term. This is the difference between running public affairs and being a good politician. There is an urgent need to offer young people guarantees of sufficiently stable employment, security for their homes, and incentives not to leave the country. It is a task that also closely concerns the world of economics: how wonderful it would be to see an increase in the number of businesses and companies that, in addition to producing profits, promote lives, that are careful never to exploit people with unsustainable conditions and hours, that are able to distribute part of the profits to workers, with a view to contributing to an invaluable development, that of families! This is a challenge not only for Italy, but for many countries, often rich in resources, but poor in hope.

Solidarity must also be expressed in the precious service of information, which has such an impact on life and on how it is told. It is in vogue to provide information, but the criterion for training and informing is not the audience, not controversy, but human growth. What is needed is 'family-format information', where people talk about others with respect and delicacy, as if they were their own relatives. At the same time, it must bring to light the interests and plots that damage the common good, the manoeuvres that revolve around money, sacrificing families and individuals. Solidarity then calls on the worlds of culture, sport and entertainment to promote and enhance the birth rate. The culture of the future cannot be based on the individual and the mere satisfaction of his or her rights and needs. What is needed is a culture that cultivates the chemistry of the whole, the beauty of giving, the value of sacrifice.

Dear friends, I would finally like to say the simplest and most sincere word: thank you. Thank you for the *General States of Birth*, thank you to each one of you and to all those who believe in human life and in the future. Sometimes you will feel as if you are shouting in the desert, tilting against windmills. But go on, do not give up,

because it is good to dream, to dream well and to build the future. And without a birth rate there is no future.
Thank you.
