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Meeting of prayer and witness on the occasion of World Day of the Poor in Assisi

This morning, the Holy Father Francis presided at the meeting of prayer and witness in Assisi, where he met with a group of five hundred poor people from various parts of Europe for a moment of listening and prayer. The meeting took place on the occasion of the Fifth World Day of the Poor, held on Sunday 14 November 2021.

Upon arrival in Assisi, before arriving at the Basilica of Saint Mary of the Angels, the Holy Father visited the Monastery of Saint Clare for a brief meeting with the Claretian community.

The Holy Father was welcomed at the entrance to the Basilica of Saint Mary of the Angels by various authorities. Three poor people then addressed some words of welcome to him, and symbolically handed him the Pilgrim's cloak and staff, to indicate that they had come as pilgrims to the places of Saint Francis in order to listen to his word.

The Holy Father then entered the Basilica and proceeded to the Portiuncola, where he paused in prayer for some minutes.

After listening to several testimonies, the Pope delivered his address.

After brief refreshments, the Holy Father stopped in the Basilica for a moment of prayer with the participants in the meeting.

At the end, the Pope returned to the Vatican by helicopter while the poor were hosted for lunch by Bishop Domenico Sorrentino of Assisi-Nocera Umbra-Gualdo Tadino.

The following are the words the Holy Father addressed to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I thank you for accepting my invitation – I was the guest! – to celebrate here in Assisi, the city of Saint Francis, the fifth World Day of the Poor that will be celebrated the day after tomorrow. It is an idea that came from you, it grew, and we have now reached the fifth edition. Assisi is not just like any other city: Assisi bears the imprint of the face of Saint Francis. To think that he lived his restless youth along these streets, he received the call to live the Gospel to the letter. He is a fundamental lesson for us. Certainly, in some ways, his holiness makes us quiver because it seems impossible to imitate him. But then, when we remember some moments of his life, those “little flowers” that were collected to show the beauty of his vocation, we felt attracted by his simplicity of heart and simplicity of life: it is the very attraction to Christ, to the Gospel. These are actual facts of his life that are worth more than preaching.

I would like to recall one of them that expresses well the personality of the *Poverello* (Cf. *Little Flowers*, chapter 13: *Fonti Francescane*, 1841-1842. He and Brother Masseo had embarked on a journey to go to France, but they had not taken any provisions with them. At a certain point, they had to begin to ask for charity. Francis went in one direction and Brother Masseo in another. But, as the *Little Flowers* recount, Francis was small of stature and those who did not know him took him to be a “tramp”; instead, Brother Masseo “was a tall and handsome man”. Thus it was that Saint Francis succeeded in obtaining some pieces of stale and hard bread, while Brother Masseo was given some beautiful pieces of bread.

When the two found themselves together again, they sat down on the ground and placed what they had collected on a rock. Seeing the pieces of bread his brother had collected, Francis said: “Brother Masseo, we are not worthy of this great treasure”. The brother, marveling, responded: “Father Francis, how can you speak of a treasure where there is such poverty and even what is necessary is lacking?” Francis replied: “It is precisely this that I consider a great treasure, that there is nothing, but what we have has been given by Providence who has given us this bread”. This is the teaching that Saint Francis gives us: knowing how to be content with the little we have and to share it with others.

We are here at the Portiuncula, one of the small churches that Saint Francis thought of restoring after Jesus had asked him to “repair his house”. At that time, he would never have thought that the Lord was asking him to give his life to renew not the church made of stone, but the one made of persons, of men and women who are the living stones of the Church. And if we are here today, it is precisely to learn from what Saint Francis did. He liked to stay to *pray* for long periods in this little church. He would recollect himself here in silence and put himself in an attitude of listening, listening to what God wanted of him. We too have come here for this: we want to ask the Lord to hear our cry, to hear our cry and to come to our aid. Let us not forget that the first marginalisation the poor suffer from is spiritual marginalization. For example, many people and many young people find a bit of time to help the poor and bring them food and hot beverages. This is very good and I thank God for their generosity. But I especially rejoice when I hear that these volunteers stop a bit and speak with the people, and sometimes pray together with them... So, even our being here at the Portiuncula, reminds us of the Lord's company, that He never leaves us alone, he always accompanies us in every moment of our lives. The Lord today is with us. He accompanies us, in listening, in prayer and in the testimonies given: it is He, with us.

There is another important fact: here at the Portiuncula, Saint Francis welcomed Saint Clare, the first brothers, and many poor people who came to him. He received them simply as brothers and sisters, sharing everything with them. This is the most evangelical expression we are called to make our own: *hospitality*. Hospitality means to open the door, the door of our house and the door of our heart, and to allow the person who knocks to come in. And that they might feel welcome, not ashamed, no, at ease, free. Where there is a true sense of fraternity, a sincere experience of hospitality is also lived there. Instead, where there is fear of the other, contempt for their lives, then rejection is born, or worse, indifference: looking the other way. Hospitality generates a sense of community; rejection, on the contrary, closes in on one's own egoism. Mother Teresa, who made hospitable service her life, used to love to say: “what is the best welcome? A smile”. A smile. To share a smile with someone in need does good to both people – to me and the other person. A smile as an expression of sympathy, of tenderness. And then, a smile engages you, and you cannot turn away from a person who has smiled at you.

I thank you because you have come here from many different countries to live this experience of encounter and of faith. I would like to thank God who gave us this idea of the Day of the Poor. An idea born in a rather strange way, in a sacristy. I was about to celebrate Mass and one of you - his name is Étienne - do you know him? He is an *enfant terrible* - Étienne suggested to me: "Let's have a Day of the Poor". I went out and I felt that the Holy Spirit, inside, was telling me to do it. That is how it began: from the courage of one of you who has the courage to carry things forward. I thank him for his work over the years and the work of so many who accompany him. And I would like to thank Cardinal [Barbarin] for his presence: he is among the poor, he too has suffered with dignity the experience of poverty, of abandonment, of distrust. And he has defended himself with silence and prayer. Thank you, Cardinal Barbarin, for your testimony which builds up the Church. I was saying that we have come to *meet each other*: this is the first thing, that is, to go towards each other with an open heart and outstretched hand. We know that every one of us needs the other, and that even weakness, if experienced together, can become a strength that will make the world better. The presence of the poor is often seen as an annoyance and is put up with. Sometimes we hear it said that those responsible for poverty are the poor! A further insult. So as not to carry out a serious examination of conscience on one's own actions, on the injustice of certain laws and economic measures, an examination of conscience on the hypocrisy of those who want to enrich themselves excessively, blame is laid at the feet of those who are weakest.

Rather it is time that *the poor be given back their voice*, because for too long their requests have remained unheard. It is time that eyes be opened to see the state of *inequality* in which many families live. It is time for sleeves to be rolled up so dignity can be restored by creating *jobs*. It is time to be scandalised once again before the reality of *children* who are starving, reduced to slavery, tossed about in the water in the aftermath of a shipwreck, innocent victims of every sort of violence. It is time that violence against *women* cease and that they be respected and not treated like bargaining chips. It is time that the circle of *indifference* be broken so as to discover once again the beauty of encounter and dialogue. It is time to meet each other. It is the time to meet. If humanity, if we men and women do not learn to meet each other, we are heading for a very sad end.

I have attentively listened to your testimonies, and I thank you for everything you have *courageously* and *sincerely* expressed. Courageously, because you wanted to share these things with all of us, even though they are a part of your personal lives; sincerely, because you expressed yourselves exactly as you are and opened your hearts with the desire to be understood. There are some things in particular that I liked and would like to summarize them somehow to make them even more my own and let them settle into my heart. First of all, I perceived a tremendous *sense of hope*. Life has not always treated you well; indeed, it has often shown you its cruel face. Marginalisation, suffering sickness and loneliness, the lack of so many necessary means has not stopped you from seeing with eyes filled with gratitude the little things that have enabled you to hold out.

To hold out. This is the second impression I received and that comes directly from hope. What does it mean to hold out? To have the strength to keep going despite everything. To swim against the current. To hold out is not a passive action, on the contrary, it requires the courage to take a new path knowing it will bear fruit. To hold out means to find reasons for not giving up when confronted with difficulties, knowing that we do not experience them alone but together, and that only together can we overcome them. To hold out against every temptation to give up and fall into loneliness and sadness. To hold out, holding on to the little wealth we may have. I think of the girl in Afghanistan, with her striking phrase: my body is here, my soul is there. Holding out with memory, today. I think of the Romanian mother who spoke at the end: pain, hope and no way out, but strong hope in her children who accompany her and repay the tenderness they received from her.

Let us ask the Lord to always help us find serenity and joy. Here at the Portiuncula, Saint Francis teaches us the joy that comes from seeing those who are near us as traveling companions who understand and support us, just as we are for him or for her. May this meeting open all of our hearts to put ourselves at each other's disposal; to open our hearts to make our weakness a strength to help continue on the journey of life, to transform our poverty into wealth to be shared, and thus to make the world better.

The Day of the Poor. Thank you to the poor who open their hearts to give us their wealth and heal our wounded hearts. Thank you for this courage. Thank you, Étienne, for being docile to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Thank you for these years of work; and also for the "stubbornness" of bringing the Pope to Assisi! Thank you!

Thank you, Your Eminence, for your support, for your help to this Church movement - we say "movement" because they are on the move - and for your testimony. And thank you all. I carry you all in my heart. And, please, do not forget to pray for me, because I have my poverty, in many ways! Thank you
