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Message of the Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development on the occasion of World Fisheries Day (21 November 2021)

The following is the message from the prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, His Eminence Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson, for World Fisheries Day, to be held on 21 November 2021:

Message of His Eminence Cardinal Peter K. A. Turkson

The World Fisheries Day was celebrated for the first time in 1998 by the fisherfolk communities, who wanted to highlight the way of living in the fisheries sector, that employs the largest number of workers, and generate one of the most-traded food commodities worldwide: the fish.

When we talk about fishing and fishers, it is like venturing into a sea as wide and deep as the one in which fishing vessels of different sizes and shapes, with fishers of all races and nationalities, are endlessly sailing, trying to fill their nets with fish to satisfy the insatiable appetite of our world.

During this World Fisheries Day, we would like to focus our attention to the industrial/commercial fishing sector, that is entangled already for too long, in a net of troubles and challenges related to Human Rights violations at sea, where the consequences of which were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and made more problematic the life for fishers and their families.

Despite the continuous efforts made by the international organizations to implement the various Conventions and Agreements regarding working conditions, safety at sea and IUU fishing, we have to admit that most of the time when the fishing vessel leaves the calm water of the port, the fishers become hostages of circumstances that are extremely difficult to monitor because of miles and miles away from land, and the crew is incapacitated to come ashore regularly since the fishing vessel does not leave the fishing ground for months, if not years at the time.

While on the fishing ground, fishers experience threats and intimidation by the skipper and officers, they are forced to work endless shifts day and night to catch as much fish as possible in any kind of weather. Because of overfatigue, frequent are the occupational accidents. With more than 24,000 deaths in a year, we can define the fishing industry, a deadly one. Little compensation or not at all is offered to the families and the relatives of the deceaseds often are not given even the consolation of a tomb where to pray and lay a flower, because the bodies are swiftly buried in the middle of the sea.

The average age of the world's industrial fishing fleet is more than 20 years old, and it should be a source of great concern for owners and governments, especially on the issue of safety. The conditions on board are inhumane, since the kitchens and pantries are dirty, water tanks are rusted, drinking water is restricted, food is of poor quality and inadequate. Cabins for crew are small, without ventilation and not enough space to move around. Going to the toilet, often is a risky balancing act between two pieces of wood hanging on the open sea.

Because of lack of fish stocks in international waters and the expanding nationals, EEZ fishing vessels tend to poach in national waters. Armed clashes break out with the military patrolling the national borders, and if caught, the vessel is put under arrest, the catch is seized, the crew is locked in jail and abandoned in a foreign country by the owner that refuses to pay the tickets for their repatriation and back wages.

Salaries are not proportionate to the number of hours rendered; overtime work is not considered. The agent keeps a portion of the monthly salary until the end of the three years contract, in this way fishers are forced to keep silence and not to complain to the authority, if they do not want to lose the savings kept by the agency.

To compensate the reduced income from fishing, because of intense competition from too many fishing fleets chasing fewer fish, unscrupulous fishing vessel owners are turning to Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated fishing (IUU), and related transnational crime activities, such as trafficking in persons, slavery, as well as drugs and weapons smuggling.

As Catholic Church, while we acknowledge some improvements in the human and working conditions of fishers, we recognize nevertheless that there are still too many human rights violations at sea and, we call once again, the international organizations, governments, civil societies, the different players on the supply chain and NGOs to join forces to stop it!

The problems affecting the fishing industry are interconnected. Unless we draw our attention to these continuous abuses and violations at sea and work together to create a fishing industry where the human and labor rights of the fishers are guaranteed and promoted, it might become more difficult to eradicate it and the human and economic cost for the industry would be very high.

The Holy See, following the teaching of the Gospel and the Magisterium of the Catholic Church has always advocated *"Respect for those [human] rights is the preliminary condition for a country's social and economic development. When the dignity of the human person is respected, and his or her rights recognized and guaranteed, creativity and interdependence thrive, and the creativity of the human personality is released through actions that further the common good (Fratelli Tutti, 22)"*.

We would like to call on the Stella Maris chaplains and volunteers to continue their compassionate mission to welcome the fishers and see in their faces the face of the suffering Jesus Christ and provide them with spiritual and material support.

As Pope Francis tells us in *"Fratelli Tutti"*: *"We cannot be indifferent to suffering; we cannot allow anyone to go through life as an outcast. Instead, we should feel indignant, challenged to emerge from our comfortable isolation and to be changed by our contact with human suffering (68)"*.

On this World Fisheries Day, our indignation for the many Human Rights violations at sea, should be transformed in a new strength that would influence the fishing industry to place at the center of its interests, the

respect of the human and labor rights of the fishers, because, as Pope Francis said in July 2019 to the participants of the European Meeting of Stella Maris: “...*without fishermen, many parts of the world would starve.*”

Cardinal Peter K. A. Turkson
Prefect
