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Audience with participants in the International Conference “Eradicating child labour, building a better future”

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the international conference “Eradicating child labour, building a better future”, promoted by the Vatican COVID-19 Commission of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, with the collaboration of the Holy See Permanent Mission at the FAO, to take place this afternoon:

Address of the Holy Father

Your Eminence,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear brothers and sisters!

I have the pleasure of welcoming you all, gathered here from many parts of the world, despite the difficulties due to the pandemic, to attend the international conference “*Eradicating child labour, building a better future*”, which will take place this afternoon at the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

The scourge of the abuse child labour, on which you are reflecting together today, is of particular importance for the *present* and the *future* of our humanity. The way we relate to children, the extent to which we respect their innate human dignity and fundamental rights, expresses what kind of adults we are and want to be, and what kind of society we want to build.

It is shocking and disturbing that in today’s economies, whose productive activities rely on technological innovations, so much so that we talk about the “fourth industrial revolution”, the employment of children in work activities persists in every part of the world. This endangers their health and their mental and physical well-being,

and deprives them of the right to education and to live their childhood with joy and serenity. The pandemic has further aggravated the situation.

Child labour is not to be confused with the small domestic tasks that children, in their spare time and according to their age, can perform as part of family life, to help parents, siblings, grandparents or other members of the community. These activities are generally beneficial to their development, as they allow them to test their skills and grow in awareness and responsibility. Child labour is something else entirely! It is the *exploitation of children* in the production processes of the globalised economy *for the profit and gain of others*. It is the *denial of children's rights* to health, education and harmonious growth, including the possibility to play and dream. This is tragic. A child who cannot dream, who cannot play, cannot grow up. It is *robbing children of their future* and therefore humanity itself. *It is a violation of human dignity*.

Extreme poverty, lack of work and the resulting desperation in families are the factors that expose children most to labour exploitation. If we want to eradicate the scourge of child labour, we must work together to eradicate poverty, to correct the distortions in the current economic system, which centralises wealth in the hands of a few. We must encourage states and business actors to create opportunities for decent work with fair wages that enable families to meet their needs without their children being forced to work. We must combine our efforts to promote quality education that is free for all in every country, as well as a health system that is accessible to all without distinction. All social actors are called upon to combat child labour and its causes. The participation in this conference of representatives of international organisations, civil society, business and the Church is a sign of great hope.

I urge the Department for the Service of Integral Human Development, which is also responsible for promoting children's development, to continue its work of stimulating, facilitating and coordinating the initiatives and efforts already underway at all levels to combat child labour.

And to you, speakers and participants at this meeting, I express my gratitude: thank you for sharing your expertise and commitment to this cause, which is truly a question of civilisation. I encourage you to continue along this path, without becoming discouraged by the inevitable difficulties, but always expanding the network of people and organisations involved. Let us always keep in mind the words of Jesus in the Gospel: "*Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me*". (Mt 25:40).

I entrust you, your families and your work to the maternal intercession of Mary Most Holy, and I bless you from my heart. Thank you.
