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Audience with participants in the International Congress promoted by the Pontifical Foundation *Gravissimum Educationis*

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the International Congress “Educating for democracy in a fragmented world”, promoted by the Pontifical Foundation *Gravissimum Educationis*, taking place at the LUMSA University in Rome from 17 to 19 March 2022.

The following is the Pope’s address to those in attendance:

Address of the Holy Father

We are used to hearing news of wars, but far away. Syria, Yemen... the usual. Now the war has come closer, it is on our doorstep, practically. And this makes us think about the “savagery” of human nature, how far we are capable of going. Murderers of our brothers. Thank you, Msgr. Guy-Réal Thivierge, for this letter that you brought, which is a wake-up call, it draws attention to what is happening. We talk about education, and when one thinks of education one thinks of children, young people... We think of so many soldiers who are sent to the front, very young, Russian soldiers, poor things. Think of the many young Ukrainian soldiers; think of the inhabitants, the young people, the young girls, boys, girls... This is happening close to us. The Gospel only asks us not to look the other way, which is precisely the most pagan attitude of Christians: the Christian, when he gets used to looking the other way, slowly becomes a pagan disguised as a Christian. This is why I wanted to begin with this, with this reflection. The war is not far away: it is at our doorstep. What am I doing? Here in Rome, at the “Bambino Gesù” Hospital, there are children wounded by the bombings. At home, they take them home. Do I pray? Do I fast? Do I do penance? Or do I live carefree, as we normally live through distant wars? A war is always - always! - the defeat of humanity, always. We, the educated, who work in education, are defeated by this war, because on another side we are responsible. There is no such thing as a just war: they do not exist!

Dear friends,

I welcome all of you who are participating in the International Congress “Educating for Democracy in a

fragmented world”, promoted by the Pontifical Foundation *Gravissimum Educationis*.

I thank Cardinal Versaldi for his words of introduction and I am grateful to each one of you for bringing the richness of your own cultural context, your own professional and research field. This meeting of yours addresses the theme of democracy from an educational perspective. It is a very topical issue, and one that is also much debated. But it is not often that it is addressed from the point of view of education. And yet this approach, which belongs in a special way to the tradition of the Church, is the only one capable of yielding long-term results.

I would like to offer you a brief reflection starting from the Word that the Lord addresses to us in the Gospel of today's liturgy, that is, the parable of the murderous vinedressers (*Mt 21:33-43, 45-46*). Jesus warns against a temptation that is of everyone and of all times: the temptation of possession. The vinedressers in the parable, blinded by their lust to take possession of the vineyard, do not hesitate to use violence and kill. This reminds us that when man denies his own vocation as a collaborator in God's work and presumes to put himself in His place, he loses the dignity of son and becomes an enemy of his brothers. He turns into Cain.

The goods of creation are offered to each and every person in proportion to his or her needs, so that no one may accumulate the superfluous nor anyone else lack basic necessities. On the contrary, when selfish possession fills hearts, relationships and political and social structures, then the essence of democracy is poisoned. And it becomes a democracy only in form, not in substance.

I will focus on two forms of degeneration: totalitarianism and secularism. They are degenerations of democracy.

Saint John Paul II pointed out that a state is totalitarian when it “tends to absorb within itself the nation, society, the family, religious groups and individuals themselves” (Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, 45). By exercising ideological oppression, the totalitarian State strips fundamental rights of the person and society of their value, to the point of suppressing freedom. It is an ideological tyranny, and we can speak of the ideological colonizations that continue, and which lead us to this.

Radical secularism, which is itself ideological, deforms the democratic spirit in a more subtle and insidious way: by eliminating the transcendent dimension, it weakens, and little by little cancels, any openness to dialogue. If there is no ultimate truth, human ideas and convictions can easily be exploited for purposes of power. “A humanism which excludes God is an inhuman humanism”

said Benedict XVI (Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 78). And herein lies the small but substantial difference between a healthy secularism and a poisoned secularism. When secularism becomes ideology, it turns into secularism, and this poisons relationships and even democracies.

You have counteracted these degenerations with the transforming power of education. In some universities around the world, for example, you have launched training activities, seeking the most effective strategies for transmitting democratic principles, *for educating in democracy*. I invite you to continue along this line and I share some proposals that I entrust to all of you who are involved in various fields.

1. *Feed young people's thirst for democracy*. It is a question of helping them to understand and appreciate the value of living in a democratic system, always perfectible but capable of safeguarding citizens' participation (cf. *Centesimus Annus*, 46), freedom of choice, action and expression. And to go down the road of universality versus uniformity. The poison is uniformity. And that young people learn the difference and also practice it.

2. *Teach young people that the common good is formed with love*. It cannot be defended by military force. A community or nation that wants to assert itself by force does so to the detriment of other communities or nations, and becomes a fomenter of injustice, inequality and violence. The path of destruction is easy to take, but it produces so much rubble; only love can save the human family. On this, we are living the ugliest example close to us.

3. *Educate young people to live authority as service.* There is a need to “train individuals who are ready to offer themselves in service to the community” (*Message for the launch of the Global Compact on Education*, 12 September 2019). We are all required to perform the service of authority, in the family, at work, in social life. Exercising authority is not easy: it is a service. Let us not forget that God entrusts us with certain roles not for personal affirmation but so that, through our work, the whole community may grow. When authority goes beyond the rights of society, of people, it becomes authoritarianism and ultimately becomes dictatorship. Authority is a very balanced thing, but it is a beautiful thing that we must learn and teach young people so that they can learn to manage it.

These are three educational paths oriented, as Saint Paul VI would say, towards the civilization of love, and they demand to be pursued with courage and creativity. It seems to me that they fit well into the framework of the Global Compact on Education that we have initiated together with the Congregation for Catholic Education. I would like to take this opportunity to relaunch this Pact, this alliance that aims to bring together all those who have the education of the younger generations at heart, and which can become an instrument for pursuing the global common good. In the context caused by the war in Ukraine, the value of this Compact on Education in promoting universal brotherhood in the one human family, based on love, stands out even more. Prayer for peace must be accompanied by a patient commitment to education, so that children and young people may develop a firm awareness that conflicts are not resolved by violence, nor by oppression, but by confrontation and dialogue. There will always be conflicts: teaching young people how to resolve a conflict. Not with violence, not with oppression, but with confrontation, healthy confrontation, and dialogue.

Dear friends, I thank you for your work. From my heart I bless all of you and your loved ones, your institutions and your work. Thank you! From my heart I give this blessing to all. And I ask you, please, not to forget to pray for me. Thank you!
