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Audience with the participants in the General Assembly and Conference of the European Parents' Association (EPA)

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the General Assembly and Conference of the European Parents' Association (EPA), underway in Rome from 10 to 11 November 2023, to whom he delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear friends, good morning!

I am pleased that we can meet on the occasion of your Assembly, and I offer you my prayerful good wishes that it will bear good fruit. Our meeting also allows me to share with you some reflections on the vocation and mission of parents.

Becoming a parent is one of life's greatest joys, bringing new energy, momentum and enthusiasm to couples, who nonetheless often find themselves faced with educational responsibilities for which they have little preparation. We can think, for example, of the need to give children loving care while at the same time helping them to grow into maturity and independence; or helping them to acquire sound habits and healthy lifestyles while being sensitive to their individual personalities and gifts, and not imposing our own expectations. Similarly, helping them to adjust to school and to develop a positive approach to affectivity and sexuality, while at the same time protecting them from threats such as bullying, alcohol, tobacco use, pornography, violent video games, gambling, drugs and so forth.

This is why networks of support for parents, such as your own Association, are so important. By enabling parents to share experiences and educational pathways, such networks help them to be better prepared and, above all, not to feel abandoned or discouraged.

The educational mission of parents is certainly not encouraged by today's cultural context, at least in Europe, marked as it is by ethical subjectivism and practical materialism. The dignity of the human person, while constantly affirmed, at times is not respected. Parents soon realize that their children are immersed in this cultural environment. What they absorb from the media is often at odds with what, until a few decades ago, was considered "normal" but is no longer the case. Parents thus find themselves constantly having to show their children the goodness and reasonableness of choices and values that can no longer be taken for granted, such as the importance of marriage and the family, or the decision to accept children as a gift from God. This is no easy task, since these are values that can only be passed on by the witness of life!

Faced with these difficulties, which can certainly be discouraging, there is a need for mutual support and encouragement, so that parents can be helped to develop a "passion" for their educational mission. To raise children is to teach them what it means to be fully human. The culture all around us may change, but the needs of the human heart remain the same, and eventually this is seen to be true, even in the lives of children. That must always be our starting point. God himself has planted in our nature an irrepressible need for love, truth and beauty, an openness to others in healthy relationships and an openness to himself as our Creator. These yearnings of the human heart are powerful allies of every educator. If children are helped to recognize them and to be sensitive to them, they will have no difficulty seeing the goodness and value of the example their parents set.

The work of education can be said to be successful when children come to realize the beauty of life in this world and grow confident and enthused about the prospect of embarking on the adventure of life, convinced that they too have a mission to carry out, a mission which will bring them great fulfillment and happiness.

All this, dear friends, presupposes the deeper realization of God's immense love for us. When we realize that at the root of our being is the love of God our Father, then we see clearly that life is good, that being born is good and that loving is good. Everyone can say, "God himself has made me a good gift, and I myself am a gift to my loved ones and to the world". This certainty helps us not to live a life shaped by a demeaning tendency to "hoard" material goods, a constant concern not to run risks, not to get overly involved, not to get our hands dirty, for there are such "traps"... Life blossoms in all its richness and beauty when it is generously given away, when, as Jesus taught, we "lose ourselves" for others and thus truly find ourselves. Life opens up to its full richness when we give, when we give of ourselves. This is the lofty educational mission of parents: to form free and generous persons who have come to know God's love, and to bestow freely on others what they themselves have received as a gift. It is not easy to convey, but let us call this the "transmission of giving freely".

Here too we find the roots of a healthy society. For this reason, it is important that the fundamental role of parents in the social order be acknowledged at every level. Raising children represents a genuine contribution to society, because it means training young people in sound and respectful relationships with others, a readiness to cooperate in view of a shared goal, forming them to take responsibility, a sense of duty and the value of sacrifice for sake of the common good. What good work this is! These are all values that make young people reliable, solid citizens, capable of contributing to the workplace, civic affairs and social solidarity. Lacking this, children grow up as "islands," disconnected from others, incapable of a common vision, and accustomed to considering their own desires as absolute values. In that way, children become wayward, but this usually only happens when parents themselves are wayward! As a result, society "deconstructs", grows impoverished and is progressively weakened and dehumanized.

There is a clear need, then, to protect the right of parents to raise and educate their children in freedom, without finding themselves constrained in any sphere, particularly in that of schooling, to accept educational programmes contrary to their beliefs and values. Indeed, this is a very great challenge at present.

The Church is a mother who accompanies parents and families and supports them in their work of education. We are the Church. In these years, we are working to advance a "Global Compact on Education," in order to consolidate a shared commitment on the part of all institutions that deal with young people. At the same time, we are also promoting a "Compact on the Family" with cultural, academic, institutional and pastoral actors, in order to focus on the family and its various relationships: between man and woman, parents and children,

brothers and sisters. The intent is to overcome a number of “breakdowns” that are presently weakening the world of education: the breakdown between education and transcendence, the breakdown in interpersonal relationships, and the breakdown that distances society from the family, creating inequalities and new forms of poverty.

Dear friends, I encourage you to move forward with hope in your commitment, and also with courage – which we greatly need today – drawing constant inspiration and support from the Gospel’s witness to the holy parents Mary and Joseph. And, as always, now you have to pay! So please pray for the Pope. I need this! Thank you.
