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Audience with a delegation from the diocese of Belluno-Feltre, on the 60th anniversary of the Vajont disaster

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience a representation of the population affected by the tragedy of Vajont sixty years ago.

The following is the Pope's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I welcome you joyfully and greet you all who, accompanied by your bishop and the president of the province of Belluno, have come here as pilgrims. A warm welcome to the priests and the president of the "Vajont – the future of memory" Association. You bring to Rome, to the tomb of the apostle Peter, a very heavy burden of memory and suffering.

First of all, I would like to express my closeness and to thank you for what you do and for what you are: already, just by your presence, you represent a *wave of hope*. Although sixty years ago, exactly 9 October 1963, a catastrophic wave washed away entire villages and hamlets, claiming 1910 victims, you are a wave of life. Indeed, you responded to that wave of annihilation and destruction with the courage of memory and reconstruction. I think of all the silent drops that have formed this great wave of goodness: the rescuers, the rebuilders, the many who did not let themselves be imprisoned by grief but who were able to start again. You are creators, you are witnesses of these seeds of resurrection, which perhaps do not make many headlines, but are precious in the eyes of God, "specialist in new beginnings", He who from a tomb of death began an eternal story of new life. Thank you for your witness.

For you, I imagine that the incalculable and indescribable pain, like a huge sheet of ice in the heart, began slowly to thaw, thanks to the warmth of your cohesion, the closeness of many and God's help, to then irrigate society

again. And, as in the nature of your people, you did a great deal of good without many words, but with great commitment and pragmatism, rolling up your sleeves: in this way you carefully rebuilt where neglect had caused destruction.

Reflecting on the Vajont disaster, one aspect is striking: the tragedy was caused not by mistakes in the design or construction of the dam, but the very fact itself of wanting to build an artificial reservoir in the wrong place. And why? Ultimately for having placed the logic of project before care for man and the environment he inhabits; so that, while your wave of hope is moved by fraternity, that wave that brought desperation was provoked by greed. And greed destroys, whereas fraternity builds.

Dear friends, brothers and sisters, this is extremely topical. I never tire of repeating that care for creation is not simply an ecological factor, but an anthropological matter: it has to do with human life, as the Creator conceived and provided for it, and it concerns the future of everyone, of the global society in which we are immersed. And, faced with the tragedy that can result from the exploitation of the environment, you bear witness to the need to care for creation. This is essential today, as our common home is crumbling, and the reason is once again the same: greed for profit, a delirium of gain and possession that seems to make man feel omnipotent. But this is a great deception, because we are creatures and our nature asks that we move in the world with respect and care, without negating, rather conserving, the sense of a limit, which does not represent a diminution, but rather the possibility of fullness. Those who do not know how to conserve the limit can never make progress.

I would like to share another thought with you. This year marks the eighth centenary of the composition of the *Cantico of the Creatures* of Saint Francis, patron of Italy. And it is also the text that inaugurated Italian literature. In that magnificent *lauda*, the *Poverello* of Assisi calls the sun, the moon, the stars, the wind, fire and other elements, *brothers and sisters*, and he refers to them as such because creatures are part of a single “living web of goodness”, lovingly arranged for us by the Lord. Indeed, Francis’ first biographer attests that “He embraces all created beings with love and devotion such as has never been heard” (Tommaso da Celano, *Vita Seconda*, CXXIV, 165: *FF* 750). Well, in the *Canticle of the Creatures*, he praises the Lord for “Sister Water, who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste” (*FF* 263). Useful and humble, yet it became terrible and destructive in the case of Vajont, or inaccessible to many in the world who today suffer from thirst or do not have drinking water. We need the contemplative gaze, the respectful gaze of Saint Francis to recognize the beauty of creation and to know how to give things their just order, so as to stop devastating the environment with the deadly logic of greed and to collaborate fraternally in the development of life. You do this, by preserving memory and bearing witness to how life can rise up again where everything had been swallowed up by death.

Dear brothers and sisters, I therefore reiterate my gratitude, admiring the beneficial and tenacious consistency of the fabric of your community. I bless you from my heart. And I ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you.
