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BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLIS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 240120b

Saturday 20.01.2024

Audience with members of the Association for Subsidiarity and Modernization of Local Authorities (ASMEL)

This morning, in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the Association for Subsidiarity and Modernization of Local Authorities (ASMEL).

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

Address of the Holy Father

Dear ladies and gentlemen, welcome!

It is with pleasure that I meet your Association, born in 2010 to contribute to the good functioning of Italian local authorities, according to the principle of subsidiarity, dear to the social doctrine of the Church.

The territories you come from experience some of the contradictions of today's society and its development model. Small municipalities, especially those that are part of the so-called inland areas, which are the majority, are often neglected and find themselves in a condition of marginality. The citizens who inhabit them, a significant portion of the population, suffer major gaps in terms of opportunities, and this remains a source of inequality.

At the root of these gaps is the fact that it remains too expensive to offer these territories the same allocation of resources as other areas in the country. We see here a concrete example of the culture of rejection: "anything that does not serve profit is cast away".[1] And this is bad. This triggers a vicious circle – lack of opportunity often drives the most enterprising part of the population to leave, and this makes the marginal territories less and less interesting, and increasingly abandoned to themselves. Those who remain are above all the elderly and those who find it hardest to seek alternatives. As a consequence, the need for the welfare state grows in these territories, while the resources to respond decrease. This is clear, we have seen it: it always happens this way.

There is another aspect of this dynamic. It is in the inland, marginal areas, where most of the natural heritage is to be found (forests, protected areas, and so on): they are therefore of strategic importance in environmental terms. But progressive depopulation makes it more difficult to care for the land, which the inhabitants of these areas have always done. Abandoned territories become more fragile, and their disruption becomes the cause of disasters and emergencies, especially today with the increasingly frequent extreme events: for example, torrential rains, floods and landslides, droughts and fires, windstorms, and so on. Looking at these areas, we have the confirmation of the fact that listening to the cry of the land means listening to the cry of the poor and the rejected, and vice versa: in the fragility of people and the environment we recognize that everything is connected – everything is connected! – that the search for solutions requires interpreting together phenomena that are often thought of as separate. Everything is connected.

You know these things very well. Today I want to thank you for your commitment and for your work, which tries to contribute to protecting the dignity of people and care for the common home, even with scarce resources and amidst a thousand difficulties. There is a growing need for this commitment, so I invite you not to let your guard down and not to be discouraged.

There is something greater at stake than the quality of life and the care of the territories from which you come, which also deserve every effort. Since time immemorial, and even today, it is marginal areas that can become laboratories of social innovation, starting from a perspective - that of the margins - that allows us to see the dynamisms of society in a different way, discovering opportunities where others see only constraints, or resources in what others consider waste. Innovative social practices, which rediscover forms of mutuality and reciprocity and reconfigure the relationship with the environment in terms of care - from new forms of agriculture to community *welfare* experiences - demand to be recognized and supported, in order to nurture an alternative paradigm for the benefit of all.

Thinking of your field of work, I would like to suggest one strand among the many to which you should pay attention: that of the search for new relationships between the public and private sectors, in particular the private social sector, to overcome old approaches and fully exploit the possibilities that legislation now provides. The scarcity of resources in marginal areas makes people more willing to cooperate for what appears to be a common good; thus, the opportunity arises to open up participatory projects, fostering a renewal of democracy in its substantial meaning.

Another promising thread is that of the new technologies, in particular the use of the various forms of artificial intelligence. We are discovering how powerful these can be as instruments of death. We can imagine how beneficial this power could be if used not for destruction, but according to the logic of care^[2]: care for people, care for communities, care for territories and care for the common home.

And speaking of care, I am worried about the low birth rate. There is a culture of depopulation that comes from the fact that few children are born. It is true, anyone can have a dog, it is true: but we need children. In Italy, Spain ... there is a need for children. Think that one of these Mediterranean countries has an average age of 46 years! I don't know what it is in Italy, but it is close to that level. People do not have children – it is easier to have a dog. We must take the problem of the birth rate seriously, take it seriously because the future of the country is at stake there, isn't it? The future is at stake. Having children is a duty to survive, to go forward. Think about this. This is not an advertisement for a birth agency, no, no; but I want to emphasize this: the drama of the birth rate. This must be considered very seriously.

Dear friends, I wish you all the best in your work. I bless you and your loved ones from my heart. And please, I ask you to pray for me: please. Thank you!

[Blessing]

[1] *Message to participants in the National Convention of the Italian Episcopal Conference, Salerno, 24-26 October 2014.*

[2] Cfr *Messaggio per la Giornata Mondiale della Pace 2024, 1° gennaio 2024, 6.*
