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Audience with members of the National Committee for the Centenary of the birth of Don Lorenzo Milani

This morning, in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the National Committee for the Centenary of the birth of Don Lorenzo Milani, to whom he delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I warmly welcome you, members of the National Committee for the centenary of the birth of Don Lorenzo Milani, chaired by Ms. Rosy Bindi. I am grateful for the collegial effort you make to ensure that the witness and message of Don Milani may reach everyone, especially the new generations. I thank you, I greet the Cardinal and I would like to share some reflections with you.

The central event in the life of Don Milani was his *conversion*: do not forget this. It enabled him to understand fully his persona, first in his restless search and then, after his complete adhesion to Christ, in his full realization. His “yes” to God took him, transformed him and drove him to communicate it to others.

Faced with the body of a young deceased priest, Lorenzo said to his spiritual father, Don Raffaele Bensi, a decisive word: “*I will take his place*”. It was the answer to the vocation of being both Christian and a priest, so much so that the teacher who was beside him affirmed: “He did not recall any moment as a believer in which he did not think of being a priest. It seemed to him that the decision to become a priest was simultaneous with his conversion”.¹ Conversion was the heart of Don Milani’s entire human and spiritual experience that made him a believer, a priest in love with the Church, a faithful servant of the Gospel in the poor.

Don Lorenzo lived to the full the Gospel Beatitudes of poverty and humility, leaving behind his bourgeois privileges, his wealth, his comforts, his elite culture, to become poor among the poor. And he never felt belittled

by this choice, because he knew that it was his mission, and Barbiana was his place, so much so that as soon as he arrived, he purchased his tomb there.

Don Bensi, when he went to visit him already gravely ill, and saw him in the room that served as a school, with all his youngsters around him, was struck and wrote: "They were all there in silence... And he was one of them, no different, not better... I understood then, more than in any other moment, the price of his vocation, the abyss of his love for those he had chosen and who had accepted him. ... It was for me, and remains, the most heroic image of the Christian and the priest". 2

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Mt 5:6). Don Milani also experienced this beatitude with his people and his pupils. The school was the environment in which to work for a great aim, a purpose that went beyond: to restore dignity to the least, respect, entitlement to rights and citizenship, but above all the recognition of the sonship of God, which includes all of us. As he told the priests in *Pastoral Experiences*, "We have as our sole reason for life that of pleasing the Lord and showing Him we have understood that every soul is a universe of infinite dignity".3

Don Milani was a witness and interpreter of social and economic transformation, of the epoch change in which industrialization was asserting itself over the rural world, when the peasant farmers and their sons had to go to work as labourers, a condition that relegated them to the margins even more. With an enlightened mind and an open heart, Don Lorenzo understood that even the public school in that context was discriminatory for his children, because it demeaned and excluded those who started out disadvantaged and contributed over time to the entrenchment of inequalities. It was not a place of social promotion, but of selection, and it was not functional to evangelization, because injustice distanced the poor from the Word, from the Gospel; it distanced peasants and workers from the faith and the Church.

So, he asked himself how the Church could be meaningful and make an impact with her message so that the poor do not fall further and further behind. And with wisdom and love he found the answer in education, through his model of the school, that is, placing knowledge at the service of those who are the last for others, the first for the Gospel and for him.

To his little flock in Barbiana, to his people, Don Lorenzo consigned his own life, which he had first consigned to Christ. The motto "I care" is not a generic "it matters to me", but a heartfelt "you matter to me", an explicit declaration of love for his small community; and at the same time, it is the message he delivered to his pupils, and which became a universal teaching. He invites us not to remain indifferent, to interpret reality, to identify the new poor and the new forms of poverty; he invites us instead to approach all those who are excluded and to take them to heart. Every Christian should play his or her part in this.

I think that the experience of Don Milani can be reinterpreted with the words Saint John Paul II used to describe the figure of the martyr: "The martyrs know that they have found the truth about life in the encounter with Jesus Christ, and nothing and no-one could ever take this certainty from them. Neither suffering nor violent death could ever lead them to abandon the truth which they have discovered in the encounter with Christ".4

Dear brothers and sisters, we are here to say our gratitude to Don Lorenzo Milani, a restless and disquieting priest, faithful to the Lord and to his Church: let us give thanks for the witness he has left us as his demanding legacy. And thank you for what you have done, and are doing, in this centenary of his birth to make him known and heard. I bless you from my heart. And I ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you.

[1] A. Corradi, *Non so se don Lorenzo*, Milan 2012, p. 81.

[2] N. Fabbretti, "Intervista a Mons. Raffaele Bensi", *Domenica del Corriere*, 27 June 1971.

[3] *Esperienze pastorali*, Florence 1957, p. 222.

[4] Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio* (14 September 1981), 32.
