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Press Conference to present the Holy Father Francis' Message for the 110th World Day of Migrants and Refugees

This morning, at 11.30, a press conference was held in the Holy See Press Office to present the Holy Father Francis' Message for the 110th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, to be held on Sunday 29 September, on the theme "God walks with His people".

The speakers were: His Eminence Cardinal Michael Czerny, S.J., prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development; Sr. Patricia Murray, I.B.V.M., executive secretary of the UISG and delegate of the 16th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops; Blessing Okoedion, survivor of human trafficking, cultural mediator, and president of *Weavers of Hope*, and Emanuele Selleri, executive director of ASCS - Scalabrinian Agency for Development Cooperation.

The following are their interventions:

Intervention of His Eminence Cardinal Michael Czerny, S.J.

Each year the Holy Father offers a special message to celebrate the World Day of Migrants and Refugees. This year's celebration, the 110th, takes place on Sunday 29 September, and the theme is "God Walks with his People."

Pope Francis highlights the pilgrim nature of the Church. The people of God is always journeying towards the heavenly homeland. Hoping for heaven is real hope today, but it contrasts sharply with the desperate and perilous quest of so many for a place of survival, security and well-being.

The Church is now on its synodal journey, a kind of migration. The Holy Father opens his Message: "The emphasis placed on the synodal dimension permits the Church to rediscover its own pilgrim nature, as the People of God on the way through history, on a pilgrimage, 'migrating' as it were towards the Kingdom of

Heaven.”

The Church is on its way, like the people of Israel in the book of Exodus liberated from the land of bondage and thereupon free to seek the Promised Land. This long exodus from slavery to freedom takes a lifetime, and prefigures each one's path towards the kingdom of God.

The well-known Exodus story is instructive. For the people of Israel, both the push factor – forced labor, slavery, repression – and the pull factor – the Promised Land – were irresistible. Nothing could dissuade them from setting out on their hazardous journey.

Today, rather than rejecting and repressing those on the move, we should pay attention to the push and pull factors behind forced migration. If we experienced similar pressures, we would flee, too. So let's see the migrants as brothers and sisters, whether they are forced to flee, blocked from entering, or both. Their journeys of despair and hope could be ours. Further, as Pope Francis declares in his concluding Prayer, it is wrong to become selfishly possessive of our God-given corner of temporary earthly dwelling.

People on the move, the exiled and displaced, refugees and victims of trafficking, and many migrants, are cruelly tested by adversities. They can be tempted to lose hope. Yet, on the brink of despair, so many of them carry bibles and other religious items. They put their trust in the only real anchor of salvation – God who accompanies them on their journey. The fundamental meaning of the book of Exodus, and of every exodus, is that God precedes and accompanies his sons and daughters of every time and place who call on him.

This year's message says that the Lord is present in his people and in every vulnerable person on the move who knocks at the door of our heart and hopes to meet us, to meet God in us. Echoing the words of Jesus, “I was a stranger and you took me in” (Matthew 25:35), the Holy Father tells us that encounters with migrants are moments of divine revelation (theophany): “An encounter with a migrant, as with any brother and sister in need, is also an encounter with Christ. He himself has told us this.”

Pope Francis concludes with an invitation to all to walk together: this is the shared journey, the “synodal” path. We have just one common home together, this unique planet, so each of us inevitably shares the paths of the migrants and refugees of our time. Welcoming the many wayfarers on earth is how we progress together on pilgrimage toward the heavenly homeland.

Intervention of Sr. Patricia Murray, I.B.V.M.

The two icons presented for our reflection are challenging. The first is a reminder of the synodal journey being undertaken by all the people of God walking together with their different vocations, charisms, cultures and ministries in service of the reign of God in our current world reality. This reminds us of the biblical journey, the Exodus, with all its challenges, difficulties and hardships until the people of Israel reached the promised land.

The second icon recalls another contemporary journey - that of migrants crossing challenging and hostile landscapes today. The statue in St. Peter's square shows us the pain and struggle of the journey of men, women and children as they strive to reach their own promised land. Some of the obstacles they face are geographic - deserts, seas, mountain ranges, extensive plains -while others are physical barriers erected by human hands - high walls, barbed wire fences and steel barriers. Still others are the barriers of rejection, hostility, xenophobia and even hatred.

These are our sisters and brothers in need of our help. They deserve our respect, acceptance and recognition. But that will only happen when we draw close and encounter them. At borders and frontiers they arrive with great expectation, despite the dangers and travails of the journey. They are fleeing wars, terrorism and conflicts, they have been exploited and excluded economically because of corrupt political and economic systems. Many

have lost their homes and their livelihood as a result of climate change and environmental destruction.

The synod points again and again to the link between the cry of the poor and the cry of the Earth and the need to urgently tackle the ecological crisis if we are to protect the lives of the most vulnerable and indeed confront the threat to the whole of humanity. Many migrants are young men and women seeking better educational opportunities. They come carrying the hopes of their families and extended communities for a better life. The synod urges us to hear their cries and to enable them “to determine their own means of growth.” 4a.

We need to be there to welcome them and to help them in a multitude of small practical ways. All are traumatised in some way. Some are grieving deeply - I'm thinking in particular of mothers and fathers whose children have slipped from their grasp in rough and high seas and who are inconsolable at the loss of their sons and daughters or the many who have seen their family members and friends die along the way, overcome by the demands of the journey.

The synod reminds us that in meeting our migrant brother and sister we encounter “the face and the flesh of Christ, who though he was rich became poor for our sake that we might become rich through his poverty.” (2 Cor 8:9). We need to meet these brothers and sisters of ours, to get to know them, to hear the story of their lives. They have direct knowledge of the suffering Christ and they call us to conversion, to a change of mind and heart. They have much to teach us and we have much to learn - this will only happen if we truly walk together and listen deeply and help them to realise their hopes and dreams, just as we hope to realise our own.

The synod calls for radical inclusion of those on the margins and peripheries and this applies particularly to these our sisters and brothers coming to seek a more fulfilling life. The synodal image of the tent reminds us to open spaces in our hearts and in our lives for encounter, for exchange and for deep listening. When we hear the story of the other person, we become responsible for him, for her and they in turn become responsible for us. This is the mutuality of participation, communion and mission which is at the heart of our synodal way of walking together, of living together. May we seek to have “the same mindas Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5) and in journeying together, find answers to each other's needs and understand in a new way the Gospel beatitude “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” (Mt 5:3).

Intervention of Blessing Okoedion

“*God walks with His people*”: the theme of the Holy Father's Message I find in my own life. God has indeed walked with me, also through those he has made me meet along the way. I was born and grew up in Edo State, which today is generally considered the centre of human trafficking in Nigeria. Thousands of women and girls are recruited and forced into a life of abuse, debt, humiliation, violence, exploitation and above all silence. Like so many other women victims/survivors of human trafficking, I too was deceived and brought to Europe in 2013, where I was taken to a street and put up for sale. I was asked to repay a “debt” of 65,000 euros. For the exploiters you are a commodity for sale to speculate on and make money; for the sex buyers you are a commodity for sale to be bought and used for their pleasure, imposing violence on you that is “justified” by the use of money.

Thanks to the education that allowed me to know my basic rights, and thanks to God who gave me the strength and courage, I was able to escape and report what had happened. After giving the report, I was taken to an anti-trafficking centre: *Casa Rut* in Caserta, where I met Sister Rita Giaretta, who is currently in charge of *Casa Magnificat* in Rome, and who accompanied me on a path of rebirth that made me find myself again. Sister Rita was for me one of those good Samaritans that the Holy Father speaks of when he says that thanks be to God “there are good Samaritans along the way”; this is what I experienced when I met Sr. Rita who welcomed and loved me.

We often talk about willingness, we talk about prostitution as the oldest profession in the world, but we forget the vulnerability of thousands of girls, young girls and women, who often come from difficult backgrounds and are

not free but enslaved: they are victims of human trafficking, a phenomenon that is widely misunderstood. As Pope Francis says, “migrants often flee situations of oppression and abuse, of insecurity and discrimination, of lack of prospects for development”; this is also true for trafficking victims. We should have a better knowledge and understanding of the situation of the victims, where they come from, what conditions of misery, degradation, lack of opportunities drive them to leave their countries. But we should also listen more to the survivors of human trafficking, their experiences of fear and pain, but also of resistance and courage in the destination countries where they are exploited.

It was the pain and understanding of what I had to go through first-hand that made me decide to put my face to the wheel, telling my story in the book “The Courage of Freedom”, and to engage as a cultural mediator. But it was also the relationship I had with Sister Rita that made me do it. For trafficking victims, psychological support and interpersonal relationships are very important because trafficking leaves so much trauma, even after the victims have escaped or been removed from exploitation. Traffickers dehumanize and objectify their victims, resulting in a loss of self-esteem and control over their own lives, freedom and dignity. Sister Rita helped me to regain confidence in myself and others, to resume my studies and to start working as a cultural mediator and interpreter. She also accompanied me to live my faith in a deeper and truer way. I rediscovered the values that my family had passed on to me and that I had somewhat lost after being deceived and trafficked by a woman who called herself a Christian and attended one of the many churches that proliferate in Nigeria. I learnt again what it means to be a Christian. What love, tenderness, giving and faithfulness are. I felt, little by little, that I was being renewed as a person, as a woman and also as a Christian. It was only after this journey that I decided to get involved again, to tell my story and to fight human trafficking.

From this struggle an association called *Weavers of Hope* was born, which I founded with other African women survivors of human trafficking. Thanks to the *Weavers of Hope Aps* association, approximately 150 girls and women have been helped from 2018 to date to escape sexual exploitation and to start a path of social and labour reintegration. We also work in Nigeria on raising awareness and empowering girls and women, especially in rural areas. We are not ashamed to be called the survivors of sexual exploitation because through our testimony, we would like every girl child in Nigeria to have the hope to continue dreaming and for those who are still victims to find the courage to be able to get out.

In the year 2022, I graduated in Political Science and International Relations at the University of Naples “L’Orientale”, with a thesis on the reintegration of Nigerian women victims of trafficking in Italy. I interviewed seventy women who had gone through the reintegration process from 2004 to 2022. The stories are similar and make it clear that there is still a lot to be done so that these women can really lead an independent life without running the risk of falling back into the hands of traffickers. This is why I feel that my and our commitment is absolutely urgent and fundamental.

Intervention of Emanuele Selleri

Good morning, everyone.

First of all, thank you for the invitation to participate in this press conference for the presentation of Pope Francis’ Message on the occasion of the 110th World Day of Migrants and Refugees. It is important to emphasize that this is the 110th Day because it means that for at least 110 years the Catholic Church has been drawing our attention to the centrality of migration in human history and existence, although in truth it has been doing so ever since its origins.

Let us introduce ourselves: I represent as executive director the Scalabrinian Agency for Development Cooperation (ASCS), a voluntary organization founded twenty years ago as the social, operational and cultural arm of the Europe-Africa Region of the Missionaries of Saint Charles - Scalabrinians. It is fundamental for us to reiterate that the ASCS was born from the charism and heart of Saint John Baptist Scalabrini, one of the pioneers of pastoral work with migrants in the Catholic Church. As we prepare for this day, our thoughts naturally

go to this churchman not only for his foresight and prophetic vision of migratory phenomena, but also for his courage and resilience. When Saint Scalabrini in the late 1800s began his mission with Italian emigrants with the foundation in 1887 of the Scalabrinian Missionaries and in 1895 of the Scalabrinian Missionary Sisters, many in the church believed that migration was a temporary and short-lived phenomenon! Evidently, they had not yet realized that, as Scalabrini himself said, 'migration is... a law of nature'.

Over the past twenty years, the ASCS has dedicated itself to the mission with migrants and refugees in Italy and around the world in the footsteps of this great and very topical saint. The phrase that expresses the essence of our being and doing is: "with migrants, refugees and local communities in Italy and around the world". This is an affirmation of our awareness that the migratory issue cannot be managed in society and in the church by working only with migrants, but also by including native communities in a constant and ceaseless work of creating spaces and times for people to meet, an encounter that generates knowledge, conviviality, friendship and harmony.

Currently, the three main areas of intervention for our organization are: integral reception, intercultural animation especially with young people, and development cooperation. Precisely on the basis of our "motto", all the activities that arise and develop in these three areas are done not only "for", but above all with. This seemingly insignificant preposition with is one of the main keys to understanding and implementing our initiatives. In other words, we strive for the *with*, this "synodal style" of "being together" and "doing things together" with migrants and refugees, with young people, with volunteers, with local communities and churches, with other organizations working in the same field, to characterize all our activities: from the dinner and the training course at *Casa Scalabrini* 634, our centre here in Rome; continuing with the service and sharing camps with young people at the European borders of Ventimiglia, Oulx, Calais and Ceuta or at the "internal Italian borders", such as the area of the *Gran Ghetto* of Rignano in the countryside between Foggia and San Severo; and ending with the development projects in Guatemala, Bolivia and Brazil.

In this sense we can say that Pope Francis' Message for this Day is of great encouragement and inspiration to the ASCS. This is because the two certainties that Pope Francis points out to us, namely that God walks with His migrant people and that God is present in His people, confirm and encourage us to persevere in our action *with*. They tell us that by continuing to be and to work with, we are on the right path, that is, the path taken by God Himself who, despite our difficulties and reluctance, insists on asking us to meet our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters to walk a stretch of the road with them, to share our lives with them. At the same time, the fact that God is present in the migrant people urges us to welcome the extraordinary surprises that this journey holds for us precisely because the encounter with migrants and refugees opens us up to an encounter with God Himself. And finally, the fact that God walks with the migrant people must teach us the humility to understand that the protagonist of the mission with migrants and refugees is not the ASCS, but God Himself. So, we are called to walk on the path that God shows us, to do our best to be and do with migrants and refugees in their journeys, but in the knowledge that we are at the service of this mission, not its protagonists. And this means concretely that the part of the road we will take with migrants and refugees, even if it is not enough in our eyes, must be undertaken with the confidence that God is present, that God participates in this journey, that God will do His part, even if we do not manage to do ours well. This is the certainty that gives us the strength and hope to continue with the mission entrusted to us.
