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Audience with participants in the III Encuentro de Iglesias Hospital de Campaña

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the *III Encuentro de Iglesias Hospital de Campaña*, to whom he delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Thank you for coming. Welcome to this meeting, in which I am happy to receive you. I would like to address a few words to you, to help you reflect on your work in the Church, the work you carry out, on behalf of the poorest and most marginalized.

I would like to share with you three aspects that I mentioned recently: first, *proclaiming Christ*; second, *remedying inequalities*; and third, *sowing hope*. Proclaiming Christ, remedying inequalities Aided by the grace of the Holy Spirit, you strive for churches to be like a field hospital, putting three principles into practice. At times I am sorry when I ask a priest, “How is your parish?”. “Good, we have a lot of Masses”. “But how many people in total come on a Sunday?”. “Around 1000, 1200”. “Ah, good. And how many people are there in your neighbourhood?”. And then he hesitates before saying 200,000, 250,000. Or rather, we must be aware that few people come to Church. We have to go and look for them ourselves.

Bear witness to welcoming people by actions more than by words. A first principle: welcome. And also go to visit, which is another form of welcome. And continue to see in each one of them, vulnerable people, in that vulnerability, the face of Christ. In this way, you proclaim Christ as He who always walks with them, if anonymously, since He was the first to make Himself poor. I like to hear anecdotes of poor people in Spain, in southern Italy, who proclaim Christ as they can, in the midst of Muslim immigration, for example. And they proclaim Him with gestures, with hospitality, with accompaniment, with promoting the migrant. Welcoming Christ.

A way of welcoming Christ is in the poor and in migrants. I emphasize migrants because both in Italy and in Spain it is one of the realities – I do not want to say a problem, rather one of the realities. And, on the other hand, we must be thankful that migrants come, because the average age of the locals is rather scandalous. I

think that in Italy, the average age is 46. They do not have children. But yes, everyone has a dog or a cat, but they do not have children! And migrants come, and in a certain sense, they are the children we do not want to have. Think a little about this.

Secondly, *remedying inequalities*. With your apostolate, you denounce to society the inequality, at times very great, between rich and poor, between citizens and foreigners; it is not what God wants for humanity and, in justice, these matters must be resolved. It is necessary to restore the social fabric by repairing inequalities; no-one can remain indifferent to the suffering of others (cf. *Jn 4:9*). Think about the two extremities of life: the inequality there with children and with the elderly. When the elderly are rejected, they are banished to the “winter quarters”, as if at this time they have nothing to offer society. And think of children, when they are used for certain jobs, and are then abandoned. There are children who are used to collect things that can be sold from among the trash. In a country where there is a very delicate fruit, the blueberry, and it takes a lot of care to pick it, they use starving children to gather the blueberries, and they exploit them. A question we must ask: what happens to the children? What happens to the elderly? The elderly are a source of wisdom, and we are witnessing the scandal of keeping them in the storeroom of an old people’s home. Children and the elderly.

And finally, it is necessary to *sow hope*. In every person you welcome, because they are homeless, because they are refugees, because they are part of a family in a state of vulnerability, because they are victims of war, or for any other reason that causes them to be marginalized by society, *sow hope*.

And for all this I want to thank you publicly for your work. It is true that you are bold and fearless, not everyone has this courage, but what you do inspires others, it inspires them so much. Think of the refugees - you have to go and look for them, go and see them - the Ukrainian soldiers wounded in the war. We sow hope in these people. War is a very harsh reality. It is a reality that kills and destroys. We have to take care of these people. One thing I see when groups of Ukrainian children who have been deported come here is that they do not smile. The war has stolen their smile. So, all the work you do with refugees is very important. And, moreover, it is one of the three conditions that the Old Testament always repeats: the widow, the orphan and the foreigner - the migrant, the refugee. It is a question we must always ask ourselves. Please sow hope. In every person you welcome, in every person who has a vulnerability, sow hope.

Although these brothers and sisters often feel overwhelmed when faced with what might seem to be a “dead end” – how many “dead ends” we find nowadays, how many! – remind them that Christian hope is greater than any situation. It is not easy to say this to a casualty of war, it is not easy, but it must be said, because hope has its foundation in the Lord, not in man. One thing is optimism, which is good; but hope is another; it is completely different.

I would like all of you, in the work you carry out in the Church, never to cease to discover that assisting the vulnerable is always a privilege, because theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven (cf. *Mt 5:3*). To care for the most vulnerable is to care for the Lord himself. “Whatever you did to one of these, you did to me”. Every time we have the chance to approach them and offer our help, it is for us an opportunity to touch the flesh of Christ, because bringing the Gospel is not something abstract, an ideology, that can be reduced to indoctrination. No, it is not like that; bringing the Gospel is made manifest in Christian commitment to those most in need; therein resides true evangelization.

Sisters, brothers, I thank you for your witness of Christian life. Spread hope, spread mercy, and spread love to all these people so that, convinced of this truth, they in turn may join together in service to the poorest. “Father, so should we baptize them before they come to help serve the poorest, or should we send them to confession so that they are in the grace of God?” No. Any person, atheist, non-atheist, any person, of this religion or another. Serve, and serve the poorest. Among the poorest is Jesus. They are serving Jesus even if they don't believe in Him. All together in the bag of service, all engaged in commitment to others.

May Jesus bless you in the work you do, and please, do not forget to pray for me: but pray for, not against.

