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Audience with the faithful from earthquake-afflicted areas of Central Italy

At 11.30 a.m., in the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father Francis met with faithful from the earthquake-afflicted areas of Central Italy, accompanied by their bishops and presbyters.

During the audience, the Pope gave an impromptu address to those present, which is given below:

Holy Father's address

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I have here in writing the two testimonies we have heard, and I have underlined some expressions, some words, that touched my heart, and that I want to talk about.

A word that continued to reappear was “reconstruct”. What Raffaele said, very concisely and powerfully: “*Reconstruct hearts first, then houses*”. Reconstructing hearts. “Reconstruct”, said Don Luciano, “the social and human fabric of the ecclesial community”. Re-construct. There comes to my mind the man I found, I do not remember in which village I visited that day [when the Pope visited the earthquake zone on 4 October 2016], who said: “For the third time I will begin again to build my house”. Begin again, rather than let oneself go – “I have lost everything”, with bitterness. ... The pain is great! And reconstructing with pain. ... There are wounds in the heart. Here, a few weeks ago, I met little Giulia, with her parents, who had lost her brother and her little sister. ... Then I met the couple who had lost their twins. .. And I now I meet you, who have lost people from your family. Hearts are wounded. But there is the word that we heard today from Raffaele: reconstruct hearts, which does not mean saying “tomorrow will be better”, it is not optimism, no, there is no place for optimism here: yes for hope, but not for optimism. Optimism is an attitude that can be useful at a certain moment, that takes you ahead, but it has no substance. Today we need hope, to rebuild, and this is done with the *hands*, another word that touched me.

Raffaele spoke about “hands”: the first embrace of his wife, with his hands; then when he takes the children to pull them out of the house: hands. Those hands that help relatives to free themselves from the rubble; that hand that leaves a child in the hands of who knows who, to go and help another. “Then there is someone’s hand, that

guided me”, he said. Hands. Rebuilding, and to reconstruct requires the heart and the hands, our hands, everyone’s hands. Those hands with which we say that God, as an artisan, made the world. Healing hands. I like to bless the hands of nurses and doctors, because they serve to heal. The hands of many people that helped us out of this nightmare: the hands of the firemen, who are so good, so good. ... And the hands of all those who said, “No, I’ll give you mine, I’ll give you the best”. And the hand of God to the question “Why?” – but they are questions that have no answer. This is how things were.

Another word that came out is *wound*, to *wound*. “We stayed here so as not to wound our land any further”, the priest said. Good. Do not damage or wound that which is already damaged. And do not wound with empty words, many times, or with news that lacks respect or tenderness when faced with suffering. Do not wound. Everyone has suffered something. Some have lost a lot, I don’t know, their house, also their children or parents, that couple... But do not wound. Silence, caresses, the tenderness of the heart helps us not to harm. And then there are miracles at the moment of pain: “There have been reconciliations”, the priest said. Old stories are set aside and we find ourselves together in another situation. We find ourselves again: with a kiss, with an embrace, with mutual help ... and even in tears. Weeping alone is good for us, it is an expression before ourselves and before God; but weeping together is better, we find ourselves again, weeping together. These are the things that came to my heart when I read and heard these testimonies.

Another phrase, again said by Raffaele: “Today our life is not the same. It is true, we came out of it safely, but we have lost”. Safe, but defeated. It is something new, this road of life. The wound heals, wounds will heal, but the scars will remain for life, and they will be a memory of this moment of pain; it will be a life with an extra scar. It is not the same as before. Yes, there is the fortune to have come out of it alive, but it is not the same as before.

Then, Don Luciano mentioned virtues, your virtues: “I wish to testify to the strength of spirit, the courage, both the tenacity and the patience, and the reciprocal solidarity of my people”, he said. And this is called being “well born” – I don’t know if we use this expression in Italian – in Spanish we say “bien nacido”, well born, a person who is born well. And he, as a pastor, says: “I am proud of my people”. I too must say that I am proud of the priests who did not leave their land, and this is good: having pastors who, when they see the wolf, do not flee. We have lost, yes, we have lost many things – home, families – but we have become a great family in another way.

And there is another word that was said just twice, in passing, but it was the kernel of these two testimonies: closeness. “We have been close and remain close to each other”. It is closeness that makes us more human, better and more courageous people. One thing is going it alone, on the path of life; it is another thing to go hand in hand with another, close to another. And you have experienced this closeness.

Then, another word that was lost in the speech, to begin again, without losing the capacity to dream, to dream of recovery, having the courage to dream once again. These are the things that most touched my heart in these two testimonies, and this is why I wanted to take your words to make them my own, because in your situation the worst I could do is to give a sermon, the worst. I just wanted to take what your heart says and make it my own, say it with you, and reflect a little on this.

You know that I am close to you. And I say to you: when I realized what had happened that morning, when as soon as I awoke I found a note about the two tremors, I felt two things: I must go there, I must go there; and then I felt pain, great pain. And with this pain I went to celebrate Mass that day.

Thank you for coming here today, and in other audiences in these months. Thank you for all that you have done to help us. to build, to reconstruct hearts, homes, the social fabric; also for reconstructing [repairing] by your example the selfishness that is in the heart of those who have not suffered this. Many thanks to you. And I am close to you.
