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Press Conference to conclude the Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences (Casina Pio IV, 28 April to 2 May 2017)

At 11.15 this morning, in the Holy See Press Office in Via della Conciliazione 54, a press conference was held following the Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy for Social Sciences (Casina Pio IV, 28 April to 2 May) on the theme: *Towards a Participatory Society: new roads to social and cultural integration*.

The speakers were:

- His Excellency Msgr. **Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo**, Chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences;
- **Prof. Margaret S. Archer**, President of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences;
- **Prof. Pierpaolo Donati**, University of Bologna, Italy;
- **Prof. Paulus Zulu**, University of Natal, South Africa.

The following is the text of the press release issued by the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences to conclude the Plenary Session:

Press Release of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences

The Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences held its Plenary Session on from 28 April – 2 May 2017 on the theme “Towards a Participatory Society: new roads to social and cultural integration”. Pope Francis sent a special message, dated 24 April and published in *L’Osservatore Romano* on 29 April, which provided the backdrop and guideline for the work.

The participants in the Plenary addressed the theme of participatory society by first defining the concepts of

participation, combating exclusion and social and cultural integration, and then considering the empirical phenomena, their causes and possible solutions. These are multidimensional concepts and processes that are not identical to each other, and yet are related in many ways.

Participation can be institutional or spontaneous. Exclusion can be active (desired, as in the case of ethnic or religious discrimination) or passive (due to unintentional causes, such as a major economic crisis). In both cases it is the fruit of processes that have been analyzed in their generative mechanisms, since social and cultural integration is the result of the modification of these mechanisms, which are economic, social, cultural and political. The aim of including people and communities in society can not be pursued with forced measures or in a standardized way (for instance, with school systems that do not take into account cultural differences and local cultures). Real social participation is only possible if there is religious freedom.

The works highlighted concerns regarding the spread of social fragmentation, on the one hand, and the concomitant inability of political systems to govern society. These two phenomena are spreading in many countries and create situations of major social disintegration, where it becomes increasingly difficult to realize forms of social participation inspired by principles of justice, solidarity and fraternity.

The causes of these disruptive tendencies, which work against a more participatory society, have been identified in the crisis of political representation, increasing social inequalities, global demographic imbalances, rising migration and high numbers of refugees, the ambivalent role of information and communication technologies, and religious and cultural conflicts.

Certainly the most significant factor that works against social participation is the growing social inequality between the narrow elites and the mass of the population. Statistics on the distribution of wealth and opportunities for life indicate enormous gaps both between countries and within the various countries. Of particular concern is the fact that in Europe and America the middle class has been greatly weakened, unlike other countries such as India and China where the middle class has become stronger. Indeed, it must be considered that where the middle class breaks down, participatory democracy is endangered.

In spite of all this, it is possible to work for a better “participatory society” when it is possible to establish genuine subsidiary cooperation between a political system that is sensitive to the voice of those who are not represented, a civilized economy, and associative forms of civil society based on networks of reciprocity. It is necessary to make circular the top-down to bottom-up forms of participation, enhancing the intermediate range on the basis of the principle of collegiality.

In essence, a participatory society is one that affirms and promotes human rights, aware that human rights legislation can not achieve any utopian social transformation project but can only create the positive conditions within which people and groups can act in an ethical way, that is, to have the opportunity to dedicate themselves to the community for mutual good, and to develop new social initiatives able to generate greater social inclusion.
