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Audience with the members of the National Civil Protection Service

At 11.50 this morning, in the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the National Civil Protection Service.

The following is the Pope's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I am happy to meet today the components and operational structures that make up the National Service of Civil Protection. I greet the representatives of the voluntary organizations, the scientific community, the Fire Brigade, the Police and Armed Forces, the local, regional, state institutions and the companies that provide essential services. I thank the Head of the National Department for his presentation of the Italian Civil Protection; and I also greet the delegations of foreign states present here.

On this beautiful occasion, rejoicing in the proximity to the holy Nativity, our thoughts and our prayers can not forget the people who this year have been victims of disastrous phenomena; likewise we wish to remember those rescuers who – also recently – have given their own life to save that of others.

Today, at this variegated assembly, rescuers and rescued participate together with many ordinary citizens who have decided to make available to the community their skills and their free time, with commitment and generosity, ensuring the full operation of a system that constitutes the most complex and articulated form of public solidarity to safeguard individual and collective security.

The Italian territory is characterized by the beauty of the landscape and by the richness of its historical-artistic heritage. These wonderful elements unfortunately coexist with situations of danger and vulnerability, which often

combine to create situations of very high potential risk.

Today science and technologies are able to help us to know and predict many natural phenomena, but these assessments are not always able to translate into preventive interventions that could drastically reduce the damage to people and objects.

Thus, the Italian Civil Protection never ceases to remind us that the defence of human life and the protection of the territory and infrastructure not only occur in emergencies, but also and above all in activities of forecasting and prevention and in the subsequent phase of return to normality that despite everyone's commitment, it is sometimes longer and more complex than one might imagine.

You, workers and volunteers, are the first to know well that, as I said in the Encyclical *Laudato si'*, "Ecological culture cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate problems of pollution, environmental decay and the depletion of natural resources". Instead, "there needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality", since "to seek only a technical remedy to each environmental problem which comes up is to separate what is in reality interconnected and to mask the true and deepest problems of the global system" (No. 111).

For these reasons, the most important mission of civil protection becomes that of education, so that in peacetime every citizen is trained to know the places of daily life and, in this way, can adopt behaviours that reduce risks for themselves and for others. In this sense, initiatives that are carried out in schools with children and young people, who will be tomorrow's citizens and volunteers, are particularly useful. I always ask young people to commit themselves to loving and protecting nature and to spreading the value of coexistence, to ensure that, as a result of the daily commitment of each person, one can live in a world of greater solidarity, and therefore safer.

The territorial institutions are entrusted with the task of planning the correct use of the territory, in some cases also trying to remedy possible errors committed in the past, very often due to lack of knowledge, and to provide for its management and constant maintenance. Equally important is the preparation of civil protection plans and their dissemination: they are indispensable tools for planning prevention interventions and organizing the response in emergency situations. Often the exercise of these functions involves taking on great responsibilities, for which there are limited resources and procedures that are not always linear.

The Civil Protection, which is increasingly often called to operate also outside national borders, is a system organized on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity, a peculiarity that could inspire other sectors of public life. Coming together quickly around a table to agree and implement effective choices, overcoming individualism with a view to a shared goal, can become the method to respond with greater appropriateness to the needs of the population from the perspective of the common good.

On this path it becomes easier to keep in front of one's eyes not only problems, but also and especially the people, perceiving the mission as a qualified and qualifying service for the whole community.

In this spirit, I hope you will celebrate Christmas with joy and peace of heart. May the Lord bless you and the Virgin Mother protect you. And I ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you.
