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Audience with members of the Union of Italian Catholic Jurists (UGCI)

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the Union of Italian Catholic Jurists (UGCI) on the occasion of the 70th National Study Congress organized by the UGCI on the theme “The last. Legal protection of the weak”, taking place in Rome, at the *Augustinianum* Patristic Institute and the Libera Università Maria Santissima Assunta (LUMSA), from 9 to 11 December 2021.

The following is the Pope’s address to those present during the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

I greet you on the occasion of your seventieth National Study Congress, which has at its centre a theme that is very close to my heart: “The last. Legal protection of the weak”. I thank the president of the Union of Italian Catholic Jurists (UGCI) for his words of greeting.

I still have in my eyes and in my heart the experiences I lived on my recent apostolic journey in Cyprus and Greece. Last Sunday, visiting the refugees in the Mytilene camp on the island of Lesbos, I recalled, among other things, that “respect for individuals and for human rights, especially on this continent, which is constantly promoting them worldwide, should always be upheld, and the dignity of each person ought to come before all else” (*Address in Mytilene*, 5 December 2021). And yet, how far we are from this respect! Abuse, violence, negligence, omissions only increase the culture of rejection. And those who have no protection will always be marginalised. You, as Catholic lawyers, are asked to contribute to “reversing the course”, promoting, according to your skills, awareness and a sense of responsibility. Because even the last, the defenceless and the weak have rights that must be respected and not trampled upon. And this is an intrinsic call to our faith. This is not a passing “moralization”: it is an intrinsic call to our faith.

Let us remember – especially in this time of Advent – the words of the prophet Isaiah, referring to the Servant of

the Lord – “He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth” (*Isaiah* 42: 3-4). The Messiah announced by the prophets has rights and justice at heart. And Jesus Christ, in his earthly mission, turned with all his might to the least, to heal them by announcing to them the good news of the Kingdom of God.

Never as in these days, as in these times, have Catholic jurists been called to affirm and protect the rights of the weakest, within an economic and social system that pretends to include diversity but in reality, systematically excludes those without a voice. The rights of workers, migrants, the sick, unborn children, those at the end of their life and the poorest are ever more frequently neglected and or denied in this throwaway culture. Those who do not have the capacity to spend and to consume seem to be worth nothing. But to deny fundamental rights, to deny the right to a dignified life, to physical, psychological and spiritual care, to a fair wage, is to deny human dignity. We are seeing this: how many labourers are - excuse the word – “used” to pick fruit or vegetables, and then paid miserably and thrown out, without any social protection.

Recognising rights in principle and guaranteeing them in practice, protecting the weakest, is what makes us human. Otherwise, we allow ourselves to be dominated by the law of the strongest and we give free rein to abuse.

For this reason, the recognition of the rights of the weakest does not derive from a government concession. No. And Catholic jurists do not ask for favours on behalf of the poor, but firmly proclaim those rights that derive from the recognition of human dignity.

The role of the Catholic jurist, in whatever capacity he or she works, as consultant, lawyer or judge, is therefore to contribute to the protection of the human dignity of the weak by affirming their rights. In this way he or she contributes to the affirmation of human fraternity and not to deface the image of God imprinted in each person.

Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi was fond of repeating that “the rights of the weak are not weak rights”. It is up to you in particular to uphold them firmly and to protect them wisely, cooperating in building a more humane and just society.

May Our Lady, whom we venerate today as the Virgin of silence and listening in the Holy House of Loreta, and Saint Joseph, just man, support you in your commitment. May the witness of Blessed Rosario Livatino also inspire you. I too accompany you with my prayer and my blessing. And please, I ask you to pray for me. Thank you.
