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Audience with members of the Forum of Family Associations

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the members of the Forum of Family Associations, to whom he delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

I thank the President Gianluigi De Palo for his words and for the work carried out during these years by the Forum of Family Associations – he is not timid at all! And I thank all of you, because you strive to keep the voices of families heard in Italy: a voice that is not complaining, but proactive; a voice that is not ideological, but capable of interpreting the reality and the needs of Italian families, especially those with several children, who find themselves unjustly penalized.

Before that, however, I would like to tell you that I see in you a witness of the *joy of being a family*, that is, of the central message I wished to give with the Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. The joy of being a family does not mean that everything is fine, that there are no problems... No, it is not this. We all know that family life is made up of happy moments and painful ones, of more serene periods and more difficult, at times hard ones. But there is a joy that can run through all these situations, because it exists at a deeper level, and comes precisely from being a family, perceived as a gift, with an intimate sense of gratitude. A gratitude that is addressed first and foremost to God, and then to our ancestors, our great-grandparents, our grandparents, our parents: but also to children and grandchildren, because the young regenerate the *amoris laetitia* in the elderly and in adults. I repeat: I am not talking about an ideal family, about a *standard* model to apply in order to be happy. Every family has its journey and its history, just as every person does. I am talking about the concrete reality of so many families in which parents and children, together with grandchildren, aunts and uncles, cousins, strive day by day to go forward, not following worldly models but with a style of simplicity and service.

This is the first thing I wish to share with you, and for which I am grateful to you: the witness of being a family is

a joyful gift that inspires gratitude.

A second aspect I recognize in you, and for which I encourage you, is that you try to *stimulate good policy for families and with families*. You do so not by starting out from a particular ideology, but on the basis of the social doctrine and praxis of the Church. And you do so by applying the method of dialogue: dialogue with all the institutions responsible for family policy, not by pursuing the interests of one side, one category, but seeking the common good.

This second aspect is complementary to the first. Indeed, a Christian family cannot close itself up in its own shell; it cannot say, we are fine, the others can get by! The Christian family – but I would say every family based on love – is open and attentive to what happens outside the home, and tries to be welcoming and supportive, starting from situations in the neighbourhood, the condominium, the quarter, to those on a broader social level, as well as in other countries and other continents. The family is called to be a motor of fraternity and social friendship, rooted in a territory and at the same time open to the world.

And let us not think that this is a novelty of our times! In the nineteenth century, missionary journals brought to the homes of the simplest people, along with accounts by missionaries, also a great deal of news on distant countries and peoples. Besides, this openness belongs to the DNA of the Church, which by nature educates in a Catholic mentality, a universal perspective.

However, let us return to your work in Italy. As I was saying, it is also a political commitment in a broad- and high-ranging way, as a contribution to the common good of the country, that families not be exploited and then penalized, but rather promoted and supported. This is the only path to reach *an inversion in the trend of low birth rates*. We are here in a severe, very severe demographic winter. Here we touch on a point I share with you and on which, indeed, I thank you, because you have helped me to know the situation better. Thanks also to your initiatives, the theme of the birth rate has by now come to the forefront of the political agenda. But it is a question of passing from words to deeds; and then of passing from palliative measures to a true and effective therapy. And you, justly, do not want to limit yourselves to denouncing the problem. It would be too easy and too convenient. You try instead to follow the developments, to monitor the work of the institutions involved, not – as often occurs – to criticize the work of political adversaries, but with a constructive attitude, making realistic and documented proposals, offering expert advice beyond party lines. This is a service that a body such as yours can provide, seeking to think and act politically beyond party affiliations.

Dear friends, keep going forward on these two paths: the joyful witness of being a family, and commitment to good policy for and with families. But I must add: take care of yourselves, as couples and as families! Take the time necessary for prayer, for dialogue between spouses and with children, for the community life of the Church. And also take the time to play with your children! Play, “waste time” with your children, play. Families who want to commit themselves at the associative and social level must, all the more so, nurture spiritual life and conjugal and family spirituality.

I have said it, but I want to repeat it: we are experiencing a serious demographic winter and we must react to this, with all our strength, with our work, with our ideas to convince. My secretary told me that the other day, passing through Saint Peter’s Square, he saw a lady with a pram, and he wanted to look at the child... and there was a little dog inside! It is emblematic, that is why I say it. We need children. We need children.

I remind you of the example of Blessed Luigi and Blessed Maria Beltrame Quattrocchi. I bless you from my heart and entrust you to the protection of the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph. And please do not forget to pray for me, for I need it. Thank you.
