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Audience with representatives of the populations of Central Italy affected by the 2016-2017 earthquakes

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the representatives of the populations of Central Italy affected by the 2016-2017 earthquakes, to whom he delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I welcome you in your pilgrimage to Rome. I greet the Cardinal, the Bishops and the many civil, local and state authorities, and I welcome you all.

You come from the area of Italy scarred by the wounds of the earthquake which, between 24 August 2016 and January 2017, sowed death and destruction, leaving behind so many wounds in individuals and families, destroying production centres, homes and artistic monuments and bringing the economy of your territories to its knees in various sectors. An earthquake is a devastating experience, both physically and morally, because it causes what you have worked for over generations to collapse in a very short time, and makes you feel fragile and powerless: this is the experience of every one of you.

And yet today, as we remember with sorrow the tragedy and the victims, to whose relatives I wish to reiterate my closeness, we can, thanks to your perseverance and farsightedness, speak also about significant steps forward in rebuilding. In these years you have demonstrated that the spirit of collaboration can overcome obstacles and uncertainties, constituting “a single family dwelling in a common home” (Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, 17), so that something new can be born out of the rubble. You have been able to seize the opportunity for a new beginning, especially with the socio-economic regeneration programme *Next Appennino*, proposing three very important focuses: sustainability, nature, and the current climate changes. Let us dwell for a moment on these.

Focus on sustainability. “The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern... to seek a sustainable and integral development” (Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 13). From this perspective, adopting adequate criteria for sustainability is an important act of justice and charity, because it aims at meeting needs without compromising the safety and survival of those who are around us and will come after us. It is comforting to see how you have been able to base the rebuilding on the elimination of waste, on the valorization and equitable distribution of resources, on the protection of the most vulnerable and the removal of architectural barriers. Thus, in the face of a “disproportionate and unruly growth of many cities, which have become unhealthy to live in” (*ibid.* 44), due to pollution, chaos, isolation, marginalization and solitude, especially for the elderly and the weak, you aim at urban models in which it is “attractive to live” (*ivi.*, 143), integrated the demands linked to economic growth and technical development with those of a good quality of life, personal and communitary. It means restoring the person to the centre of the city: the person at the centre of the city. This is the way to follow, always: the person. It is the way that can also help to address the crises of depopulation and demographic decline, offering the possibility of living in environments rich in all that our forefathers left behind, enhanced and enriched by wise management for the community; all this, always with the utmost attention to oversee the legality of contracts and procedures, and safety at work. Depopulation is a key issue. There are no children in Italy, and that is serious. We have an average age of 46. It seems that families prefer to have puppies or cats and not children: it is the “veterinary culture”. Let us be careful about this. Is this the legacy we leave?

Let us come to the second point: *focus on nature*. The regions you come from are among the most beautiful in Italy and in the world, known even at international level for the charm of the landscapes and the presence of ancient towns and villages set like little gems on the mountain slopes, in the hills and in the valleys. It is a model of harmony between the work of God and that of man. Indeed, building with attention to the environment, safeguarding beauty and health, promoting a “culture of shared life and respect for our surroundings” (*Laudato si'*, 213), helps in “living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork” (*ivi.*, 217), and this is our mission. Indeed, practices aimed at not defacing the landscape with excessively invasive and unsightly constructions, not polluting the environment, not altering the habitats of other animal and plant species, all “reflect a generous and worthy creativity which brings out the best in human beings” (*ivi.*, 211). I encourage you in your intention to make rebuilding an opportunity in this sense too: to redress the mistakes of the past and to lay out plans for future growth in a different way. It is urgent, I believe, for all of Italy. Alongside commitment to improving the birth rate, hydrogeological safety represents an urgent need, made all the more necessary by the acceleration of climate change. Both approaches are farsighted, essential for today and for tomorrow.

So here is the last point: *focus on climate change*. “It is indubitable that the impact of climate change will increasingly prejudice the lives and families of many persons. We will feel its effects in the areas of healthcare, sources of employment, access to resources, housing, forced migrations, etc” (*Laudate Deum*, 2). Therefore, it is important on the one hand to apply all the necessary measures to stop the current trend, and on the other, taking note of the changes that have already taken place, to deal with them, both globally and locally. This means, for example, taking greater care in cleaning up forests and river and stream beds; reducing and discouraging the overbuilding of land; introducing new types of crops and breeding species in agriculture, with appropriate investments for the years to come. Here, too, it is a question of an open eye, attentive to others and to those who will come after us; we must not let ourselves be discouraged by criticism or discontent.

Dear friends, I sympathise with your fatigue and your concerns. I am close to those who are suffering from the loss of family and livelihood. The road to post-seismic reconstruction is long and certainly not easy, and I appreciate so much that the spirit with which you face it is good, that your spirit is determined and that your ideas are clear. Thank you. I wish you a good journey, may Our Lady accompany you.
