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Message for the Sixth World Day of the Poor (2022)

Pope Francis wants the Sixth World Day of the Poor, this Sunday, to be "a moment of grace" for us to "make a personal and communal examination of conscience and to ask ourselves whether the poverty of Jesus Christ is our faithful companion in life.

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1. “Jesus Christ… for your sakes became poor” (cf. *2 Cor* 8:9). With these words, the Apostle Paul addresses the first Christians of Corinth in order to encourage their efforts to show solidarity with their brothers and sisters in need. The World Day of the Poor comes this year as a healthy challenge, helping us to reflect on our style of life and on the many forms of poverty all around us.

Several months ago, the world was emerging from the tempest of the pandemic, showing signs of an economic recovery that could benefit millions of people reduced to poverty by the loss of their jobs. A patch of blue sky was opening that, without detracting from our sorrow at the loss of our dear ones, promised to bring us back to direct interpersonal relations and to socializing with one another once more without further prohibitions or restrictions. Now,

however, a new catastrophe has appeared on the horizon, destined to impose on our world a very different scenario.

The war in Ukraine has now been added to the regional wars that for years have taken a heavy toll of death and destruction. Yet here the situation is even more complex due to the direct intervention of a "superpower" aimed at imposing its own will in violation of the principle of the self-determination of peoples. Tragic scenarios are being reenacted and once more reciprocal extortionate demands made by a few potentates are stifling the voice of a humanity that cries out for peace.

2. What great poverty is produced by the senselessness of war! Wherever we look, we can see how violence strikes those who are defenseless and vulnerable. We think of the deportation of thousands of persons,

above all young boys and girls, in order to sever their roots and impose on them another identity. Once more the words of the Psalmist prove timely. Contemplating the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Hebrew youth, he sang: "By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors for mirth… How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (*Ps* 137:1-4).

Millions of women, children and elderly people are being forced to brave the danger of bombs just to find safety by seeking refuge as displaced persons in neighbouring countries. How many others remain in the war zones, living each day with fear and the lack of food, water, medical care and above all human affections? In these situations, reason

is darkened and those who feel its effects are the countless ordinary people who end up being added to the already great numbers of those in need. How can we respond adequately to this situation, and to bring relief and peace to all these people in the grip of uncertainty and instability?

3. In this situation of great conflict, we are celebrating the Sixth World Day of the Poor. We are asked to reflect on the summons of the Apostle to keep our gaze fixed on Jesus, who "though he was rich, yet for [our] sakes became poor, so that by his poverty [we] might become rich" (cf. *2 Cor* 8:9). During his visit to Jerusalem, Paul met with Peter, James and John, who had urged him not to forget the poor. The community of Jerusalem was experiencing great hardship due to a food shortage in the country. The Apostle immediately set about

organizing a great collection to aid the poverty-stricken. The Christians of Corinth were very understanding and supportive. At Paul's request, on every first day of the week they collected what they were able to save and all proved very generous.

From that time on, every Sunday, during the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, we have done the same thing, pooling our offerings so that the community can provide for the needs of the poor. It is something that Christians have always done with joy and a sense of responsibility, to ensure that none of our brothers or sisters will lack the necessities of life. We find a confirmation of this from Saint Justin Martyr, who wrote in the second century to the Emperor Antoninus Pius and described the Sunday celebration of Christians. In his words, "On Sunday we have a common assembly for all our members, whether they live in the

city or in the outlying districts. The recollections of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as there is time… The Eucharist is distributed, everyone present communicates, and the deacons take it to those who are absent. The wealthy, if they wish, may make a contribution, and they themselves decide the amount. The collection is placed in the custody of the presider, who uses it to help the orphans and widows and all who for any reason are in distress, whether because they are sick, imprisoned, or away from home. In a word, care is provided to all who are in need" (*First Apology*, LXVII, 1-6).

4. As for the community of Corinth, after the initial outburst of enthusiasm, their commitment began to falter and the initiative proposed by the Apostle lost some of its impetus. For this reason, Paul wrote them, asking in impassioned terms

that they relaunch the collection, “so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means” (*2 Cor* 8:11).

I think at this time of the generosity that in recent years has led entire populations to open their doors to welcome millions of refugees from wars in the Middle East, Central Africa and now Ukraine. Families have opened their homes to make room for other families, and communities have generously accepted many women and children in order to enable them to live with the dignity that is their due. Even so, the longer conflicts last, the more burdensome their consequences become. The peoples who offer welcome find it increasingly difficult to maintain their relief efforts; families and communities begin to feel burdened by a situation that continues past the emergency stage. This is the moment for us not to lose

heart but to renew our initial motivation. The work we have begun needs to be brought to completion with the same sense of responsibility.

5. That, in effect, is precisely what solidarity is: sharing the little we have with those who have nothing, so that no one will go without. The sense of community and of communion as a style of life increases and a sense of solidarity matures. We should also consider that in some countries, over the past decades, families have experienced a significant increase in affluence and security. This is a positive result of private initiatives and favouring economic growth as well as concrete incentives to support families and social responsibility. The benefits in terms of security and stability can now be shared with those who have been forced to leave behind their homes and native countries in search of safety and survival. As members

of civil society, let us continue to uphold the values of freedom, responsibility, fraternity and solidarity. And as Christians, let us always make charity, faith and hope the basis of our lives and our actions.

6. It is interesting to observe that the Apostle does not desire to oblige Christians to perform works of charity: “I do not say this as a command” (*2 Cor* 8:8). Paul is instead “testing the genuineness of [their] love” by earnestness of [their] concern for the poor (ibid.). Certainly, Paul’s request is prompted by the need for concrete assistance; nonetheless, his desire is much more profound. He asks the Corinthians to take up the collection so that it can be a sign of love, the love shown by Jesus himself. In a word, generosity towards the poor has its most powerful motivation in the example of the Son of God, who chose to become poor.

Indeed, the Apostle makes it clear that this example on the part of Christ, this "dispossession", is a grace: "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" (*2 Cor* 8:9). Only by accepting it can we give concrete and consistent expression to our faith. The teaching of the entire New Testament is unanimous in this regard. Paul's teaching finds an echo in the words of the apostle James: "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in the mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act – they will be blessed in their doing" (*Jas* 1:22-25).

7. Where the poor are concerned, it is not talk that matters; what matters is rolling up our sleeves and putting our faith into practice through a direct involvement, one that cannot be delegated. At times, however, a kind of laxity can creep in and lead to inconsistent behaviour, including indifference about the poor. It also happens that some Christians, out of excessive attachment to money, remain mired in a poor use of their goods and wealth. These situations reveal a weak faith and feeble, myopic hope.

We know that the issue is not money itself, for money is part of our daily life as individuals and our relationships in society. Rather, what we need to consider is the value that we put on money: it cannot become our absolute and chief purpose in life. Attachment to money prevents us from seeing everyday life with realism; it clouds our gaze and blinds

us to the needs of others. Nothing worse could happen to a Christian and to a community than to be dazzled by the idol of wealth, which ends up chaining us to an ephemeral and bankrupt vision of life.

It is not a question, then, of approaching the poor with a "welfare mentality", as often happens, but of ensuring that no one lacks what is necessary. It is not activism that saves, but sincere and generous concern that makes us approach a poor person as a brother or sister who lends a hand to help me shake off the lethargy into which I have fallen. Consequently, "no one must say that they cannot be close to the poor because their own lifestyle demands more attention to other areas. This is an excuse commonly heard in academic, business or professional, and even ecclesial circles… None of us can think we are exempt from concern for the poor

and for social justice" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 201). There is an urgent need to find new solutions that can go beyond the approach of those social policies conceived as "a policy *for* the poor, but never *with* the poor and never *of* the poor, much less part of a project that brings people together" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 169). We need instead to imitate the attitude of the Apostle, who could write to the Corinthians: "I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance" (*2 Cor* 8:13).

8. There is a paradox that today, as in the past, we find hard to accept, for it clashes with our human way of thinking: that there exists a form of poverty that can make us rich. By appealing to the "grace" of Jesus Christ, Paul wants to confirm the message that he himself preached. It is the message that true wealth does not consist in storing up "treasures

on earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break in and steal" (*Mt* 6:19), but rather in a reciprocal love that leads us to bear one another's burdens in such a way that no one is left behind or excluded. The sense of weakness and limitation that we have experienced in these recent years, and now the tragedy of the war with its global repercussions, must teach us one crucial thing: we are not in this world merely to survive, but to live a dignified and happy life. The message of Jesus shows us the way and makes us realize that there is a poverty that humiliates and kills, and another poverty, Christ's own poverty, that sets us free and brings us peace.

The poverty that kills is squalor, the daughter of injustice, exploitation, violence and the unjust distribution of resources. It is a hopeless and implacable poverty, imposed by the

throwaway culture that offers neither future prospects nor avenues of escape. It is a squalor that not only reduces people to extreme material poverty, but also corrodes the spiritual dimension, which, albeit often overlooked, is nonetheless still there and still important. When the only law is the bottom line of profit at the end of the day, nothing holds us back from seeing others simply as objects to be exploited; other people are merely a means to an end. There no longer exist such things as a just salary or just working hours, and new forms of slavery emerge and entrap persons who lack alternatives and are forced to accept this toxic injustice simply to eke out a living.

The poverty that sets us free, on the other hand, is one that results from a responsible decision to cast off all dead weight and concentrate on what is essential. We can easily discern the lack of satisfaction that

many people feel because they sense that something important is missing from their lives, with the result that they wander off aimlessly in search of it. In their desire to find something that can bring them satisfaction, they need someone to guide them towards the insignificant, the vulnerable and the poor, so that they can finally see what they themselves lack. Encountering the poor enables us to put an end to many of our anxieties and empty fears, and to arrive at what truly matters in life, the treasure that no one can steal from us: true and gratuitous love. The poor, before being the object of our almsgiving, are people, who can help set us free from the snares of anxiety and superficiality.

A Father and Doctor of the Church, Saint John Chrysostom, whose writings are filled with sharp criticisms of the conduct of Christians towards the poor, once

wrote: “If you are unable to believe that poverty can make you rich, think of your Lord and stop your doubting. Had he not been poor, you would not be rich. Here is something astonishing: poverty has become the source of abundant wealth. What Paul means by “wealth” [cf. *2 Cor* 8:9] is the knowledge of piety, purification from sin, justice, sanctification and a thousand other good things that have been given us now and always. All these things we have thanks to poverty” (*Homilies on II Corinthians*, 17, 1).

9. The words of the Apostle chosen as the theme of this year’s World Day of the Poor present this great paradox of our life of faith: Christ’s poverty makes us rich. Paul was able to present this teaching, which the Church has spread and borne witness to over the centuries, because God himself, in his Son Jesus, chose to follow this path.

Because Christ became poor for our sakes, our own lives are illumined and transformed, and take on a worth that the world does not appreciate and cannot bestow. Jesus' treasure is his love, which excludes no one and seeks out everyone, especially the marginalized and those deprived of the necessities of life. Out of love, he stripped himself of glory and took on our human condition. Out of love, he became a servant, obedient to the point of accepting death, death on a cross (cf. *Phil* 2:6-8). Out of love, he became the "bread of life" (*Jn* 6:35), so that all might have what they need and find nourishment for eternal life. Just as it was difficult for the Lord's disciples to accept this teaching (cf. *Jn* 6:60), so it is for us today as well. Yet Jesus's words are clear: if we want life to triumph over death, and dignity to be redeemed from injustice, we need to follow Christ's path of poverty, sharing our lives out of love,

breaking the bread of our daily existence with our brothers and sisters, beginning with the least of them, those who lack the very essentials of life. This is the way to create equality, to free the poor from their misery and the rich from their vanity, and both from despair.

10. On 15 May last, I canonized Brother Charles de Foucauld, a man born rich, who gave up everything to follow Jesus, becoming, like him, a poor brother to all. Charles' life as a hermit, first in Nazareth and then in the Saharan desert, was one of silence, prayer and sharing, an exemplary testimony to Christian poverty. We would do well to meditate on these words of his: "Let us not despise the poor, the little ones, the workers; not only are they our brothers and sisters in God, they are also those who most perfectly imitate Jesus in his outward life. They perfectly represent Jesus, the

Worker of Nazareth. They are the firstborn among the elect, the first to be called to the Saviour's crib. They were the regular company of Jesus, from his birth until his death… Let us honour them; let us honour in them the images of Jesus and his holy parents… Let us take for ourselves [the condition] that he took for himself… Let us never cease to be poor in everything, brothers and sisters to the poor, companions to the poor; may we be the poorest of the poor like Jesus, and like him love the poor and surround ourselves with them" (*Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, Meditation 263).[1] For Brother Charles, those were not merely words, but a concrete way of living that led him to share with Jesus the offering of his very life.

May this 2022 *World Day of the Poor* be for us a moment of grace. May it enable us to make a personal and communal examination of

conscience and to ask ourselves whether the poverty of Jesus Christ is our faithful companion in life.

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 13 June 2022 Memorial of Saint Anthony of Padua

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[1] Meditation No. 263 on *Lk* 2 :8-20: C. DE FOUCAULD, *La Bonté de Dieu. Méditations sur les saints Evangiles (1)*, Nouvelle Cité, Montrouge 1996, 214-216.

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