The pandemic and the crisis of the world

8 February 2021
Address to the members of the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See

Pope Francis
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Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I thank the Dean, His Excellency Mr George Poulides, Ambassador of Cyprus, for the kind words and good wishes he has expressed in your name, and I beg your pardon for any inconvenience caused by the cancellation of our meeting originally planned for 25 January last. I am grateful for your patience and understanding, and for accepting the invitation to be here this morning, despite the difficulties, for our traditional encounter.

Our meeting this morning takes place in the more spacious Hall of Blessings, in order to respect the need for greater personal distancing demanded by the pandemic. Yet this distancing is merely physical. Today's meeting speaks of something very different: it is a sign of the closeness and mutual support to which the family of nations should aspire. In this time of pandemic, the need for such closeness is all the more important, for it is clear that the virus knows no barriers nor can it easily be isolated. Overcoming it is thus a duty incumbent on each of us, as well as our countries.

I am most grateful for your daily efforts to foster relations between the countries or international organizations that you represent and the Holy See. We have been able to exchange many signs of our closeness to one another in the course of these past months, thanks also to the deployment of new technologies that have enabled us to surmount the limitations imposed by the pandemic.

All of us certainly look forward to resuming personal contacts as quickly as possible, and our gathering here today is meant to be a sign of hope in this regard. I myself wish to resume my Apostolic Visits, beginning with that to Iraq scheduled for this coming March. These Visits are an important sign of the solicitude of the Successor of Peter for God's People spread throughout the world and the dialogue of the Holy See with states. They also frequently provide an opportunity to promote, in a spirit of sharing and dialogue, good relations between the different religions. In our time, interreligious dialogue is an important component of the encounter between peoples and cultures. When it is viewed not in terms of compromising our own identity but as an occasion of mutual understanding and enrichment, dialogue can become an opportunity for religious leaders and the followers of different confessions, and can support the responsible efforts of political leaders to promote the common good.

Equally important are international agreements that foster mutual trust and enable the Church to cooperate more effectively in the spiritual and social well-being of your countries. In this regard, I would mention the exchange of instruments of ratification of the Framework Agreement between the Holy See and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Agreement on the legal status of the Catholic Church in Burkina Faso, as well as the signing of the Seventh Additional Agreement of the 23 June 1960 Convention Regulating Patrimonial Relations between the Holy See and the Republic of Austria. Additionally, on 22 October 2020, the Holy See and the People's Republic of China agreed to extend for another two years the Provisional Agreement regarding the Appointment of Bishops in China, signed in Beijing in 2018. The agreement is essentially pastoral in nature, and the Holy See is confident that the process now begun can be pursued in a spirit of mutual respect and trust, and thus further contribute to the resolution of questions of common interest.

Dear Ambassadors,

The year just ended has left in its wake fear, unease and despair, as well as grief for the great loss of life. It led to a spirit of isolation and mutual suspicion that caused states to set up barriers. The interconnected world to which we have become accustomed gave way to a world once more fragmented and divided. Yet the effects of the pandemic are themselves global, touching all the countries and peoples of the world, affecting numerous aspects of our lives, and helping to aggravate "deeply interrelated crises like those of the climate, food, the economy and migration". [1: Message for the 2021 World Day of Peace, 8 December 2020, 1.] In light of this, I thought it fitting to establish the Vatican Covid-19 Committee, for the sake of coordinating the response of the Holy See and the entire Church to requests coming from dioceses worldwide to respond to the health crisis and the serious needs that the pandemic has brought to the fore.

From the outset, it seemed obvious that the pandemic would have a significant effect on the style of life to which we are accustomed, and on conveniences and certainties we take for granted. This led to a crisis, for it

showed us the face of a world that is seriously ill, not only as a result of the virus but also in its natural environment, its economic and political processes, and even more in its human relationships. The pandemic shed light on the risks and consequences inherent in a way of life dominated by selfishness and a culture of waste, and it set before us a choice: either to continue on the road we have followed until now, or to set out on a new path.

I would like to mention briefly some of the crises that were provoked or brought to light by the pandemic, but also to consider the opportunities that they offer for the building of a more humane, just, supportive and peaceful world.

A health crisis

The pandemic forced us to confront two unavoidable dimensions of human existence: sickness and death. In doing so, it reminded us of the value of life, of every individual human life and its dignity, at every moment of its earthly pilgrimage, from conception in the womb until its natural end. It is painful, however, to note that under the pretext of guaranteeing presumed subjective rights, a growing number of legal systems in our world seem to be moving away from their inalienable duty to protect human life at every one of its phases.

The pandemic has also reminded us of the right – the right! – of each human being to dignified care, as I emphasized in my Message for the World Day of Peace celebrated on 1 January this year. For "each human person is an end in himself or herself, and never simply a means to be valued only for his or her usefulness. Persons are created to live together in families, communities and societies, where all are equal in dignity. Human rights derive from this dignity, as do human duties, like the responsibility to welcome and assist the poor, the sick, the excluded".[2: Ibid. 6.] If we deprive the weakest among us of the right to life, how can we effectively guarantee respect for every other right?

I thus renew my appeal that every person receive the care and assistance he or she requires. To this end, it is indispensable that political and government leaders work above all to ensure universal access to basic healthcare, the creation of local medical clinics and healthcare structures that meet people's actual needs, and the availability of treatments and medicinal supplies. Concern for profit should not be guiding a field as sensitive as that of healthcare.

It is likewise essential that the remarkable medical and scientific progress attained over the years – which made it possible to create so quickly vaccines that promise to be effective against the Coronavirus – benefit humanity as a whole. I encourage all states to contribute actively to the international efforts being made to ensure an equitable distribution of the vaccines, based not on purely economic criteria but on the needs of all, especially of peoples most in need.

Even so, before so a devious and unpredictable an enemy as Covid-19, access to vaccines must be accompanied by responsible personal behaviour aimed at halting the spread of the virus, employing the necessary measures of prevention to which we have become accustomed in these months. It would be disastrous to put our trust in the vaccine alone, as if it were a panacea exempting every individual from constant concern for his or her own health and for the health of others. The pandemic has once more shown us that, in the celebrated expression of the English poet John Donne, "no man is an island", and that "any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind".[3: J. Donne, Meditazione XVII, in : Devozioni per occasioni d'emergenza, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1994, pp. 112-113.]

An environmental crisis

Nor it is just human beings who are ill. The pandemic has demonstrated once again that the earth itself is fragile and in need of care.

Certainly, there are profound differences between the health crisis resulting from the pandemic and the ecological crisis caused by the indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources. The latter is much more complex and enduring, and requires shared long-term solutions. The impact of climate change, for example, whether direct, such as the extreme weather events of flooding and drought, or indirect, such as malnutrition or respiratory disease, entail consequences that persist for a considerable time.

Overcoming these crises demands international cooperation in caring for our common home. It is thus my hope that the next United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26), to take place in Glasgow next November, will lead to effective agreement in addressing the consequences of climate change. Now is the time to act, for we are already feeling the effects of prolonged inaction.

I think, for example, of the repercussions of climate change on numerous small islands in the Pacific Ocean that are in danger of gradually disappearing. This tragedy not only causes the destruction of entire villages, but also forces local communities, especially families, to be constantly displaced, with the loss of their identity and culture. I think too of the floods in Southeast Asia, especially in Vietnam and the Philippines, which have caused many deaths and left entire families without means of subsistence. Nor can I fail to mention the increased warming of the earth, which has caused devastating fires in Australia and California.

In Africa too, climate change, aggravated by reckless human interventions – and now by the pandemic – is a cause of grave concern. I think particularly of food insecurity, which in the last year has especially affected Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, with millions of people suffering from hunger. In South Sudan too, there is a risk of famine and indeed a serious and persistent humanitarian emergency: over one million children are undernourished, while humanitarian corridors are often blocked and the presence of humanitarian agencies in the territory is restricted. Not least to deal with this situation, the South Sudanese authorities urgently need to overcome misunderstandings and pursue political dialogue for the sake of full national reconciliation.

An economic and social crisis

The need to contain the coronavirus has prompted many governments to adopt restrictions on freedom of movement. For several months, these have led to the closing of businesses and a general slowdown in production, with serious repercussions on companies, especially those that are medium-sized and small, on employment and consequently on the life of families and entire sectors of society, especially those that are most fragile.

The resulting economic crisis has highlighted another illness of our time: that of an economy based on the exploitation and waste of both people and natural resources. All too often, we have neglected solidarity and other values that make it possible for the economy to serve integral human development rather than particular interests. We have also lost sight of the social significance of economic activity and the universal destination of goods and resources.

The current crisis thus provides a helpful opportunity to rethink the relationship between individuals and the economy. There is need for a kind of “new Copernican revolution” that can put the economy at the service of men and women, not vice versa. In a word, “a different kind of economy: one that brings life not death, one that is inclusive and not exclusive, humane and not dehumanizing, one that cares for the environment and does not despoil it”.[4: Letter for the “Economy of Francesco” Initiative (1 May 2019).]

To cope with the negative consequences of this crisis, many governments have prepared various initiatives and allocated substantial funding. Yet, not infrequently, attempts have been made to seek local solutions to a problem that is in fact global. Today, more than ever, we can no longer think of acting simply by ourselves. Common and shared initiatives are also needed at the international level, especially to support employment and to protect the poorest sectors of the population. I consider to be significant in this regard the commitment of the European Union and its member states. Despite difficulties, they have been able to demonstrate that it is possible to work diligently to reach satisfactory compromises for the benefit of all citizens. The allocation of funds proposed by the Next Generation EU recovery plan can serve as a meaningful example of how cooperation and the sharing of resources in a spirit of solidarity are not only desirable but also achievable goals.

In many parts of the world, the crisis has predominantly affected those working informally, who were the first to see their livelihood vanish. Living outside of the formal economy, they lack access to social safety nets, including unemployment insurance and health care provision. Driven by desperation, many have sought other forms of income and risk being exploited through illegal or forced labour, prostitution and various criminal activities, including human trafficking.

Every human being, on the other hand, has the right to enjoy the “means necessary for the proper development of life”, and must be given the means to do so.[5: SAINT JOHN XXIII, Encyclical Letter Pacem in Terris (11 April 1963), ed. Carlen, 11.] Indeed, economic stability must be ensured for all, so as to avoid the scourge of exploitation and to combat the usury and corruption that afflict many countries in the world, together with the many other injustices that occur daily under the weary and distracted gaze of our contemporary society.

The increased amount of time spent at home has also led to greater isolation as people pass longer hours before computers and other media, with serious consequences for the more vulnerable, particularly the poor and the unemployed. They become easier prey for cybercrime in its most dehumanizing aspects, including fraud, trafficking in persons, the exploitation of prostitution, including child prostitution, and child pornography.

The closing of borders due to the pandemic, combined with the economic crisis, have also aggravated a number

of humanitarian emergencies, both in conflict areas and in regions affected by climate change and drought, as well as in refugee and migrant camps. I think especially of Sudan, where thousands of people fleeing the Tigray region have sought refuge, as well as other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, or in the Cabo Delgado region in Mozambique, where many have been forced to leave their own lands and now find themselves in highly precarious conditions. My thoughts also turn to Yemen and beloved Syria, where, in addition to other serious emergencies, a large part of the population experiences food insecurity and children are suffering from malnutrition.

In various cases, humanitarian crises are aggravated by economic sanctions, which, more often than not, affect mainly the more vulnerable segments of the population rather than political leaders. While understanding the reasons for imposing sanctions, the Holy See does not view them as effective, and hopes that they will be relaxed, not least to improve the flow of humanitarian aid, especially medicines and healthcare equipment, so very necessary in this time of pandemic.

May the current situation likewise be a catalyst for forgiving, or at least reducing, the debt that burdens the poorer countries and effectively prevents their recovery and full development.

Last year also witnessed a further increase in migrants who, as a result of the closing of borders, had to resort to ever more dangerous travel routes. This massive flow also met with a growing number of illegal refusals of entry, frequently employed to prevent migrants from seeking asylum, in violation of the principle of non-refusal (non-refoulement). Many of those who did not die while crossing seas and other natural borders were intercepted and returned to holding and detention camps, where they endure torture and human rights violations.

Humanitarian corridors, implemented in the course of the last years, surely help to confront some of these problems and have saved many lives. Yet the scope of the crisis makes it all the more urgent to address at their roots the reasons that cause individuals to migrate. It also demands a common effort to support the countries of first welcome that assume the moral duty to save human lives. In this regard, we look forward to the negotiation of the European Union's New Pact on Migration and Asylum, while noting that concrete policies and mechanisms will not work unless they are supported by the necessary political will and commitment of all parties involved, including civil society and migrants themselves.

The Holy See appreciates every effort made to assist migrants and supports the commitment of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), presently celebrating the seventieth anniversary of its foundation, in full respect for the values expressed in its Constitution and of the culture of the member states in which the Organization works. Likewise, the Holy See, as a member of the Executive Committee of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), remains faithful to the principles laid down in the Geneva Convention of 1951 on the status of refugees and in the Protocol of 1967, both of which set forth the legal definition of refugees, their rights and the legal obligation of states to protect them.

Since the aftermath of the Second World War, our world has not experienced this dramatic an increase in the number of refugees. Consequently, there is an urgent need for renewed commitment to protect them, together with internally displaced persons and the many vulnerable people forced to flee from persecution, violence, conflicts and wars. In this regard, despite the important efforts made by the United Nations in seeking solutions and concrete proposals to address in a consistent manner the issue of forced displacement, the Holy See expresses its deep concern over the situation of displaced persons in different areas of the world. I think primarily of the central region of the Sahel where, in less than two years, the number of internally displaced persons has increased twentyfold.

A crisis of politics

The critical issues that I have just mentioned highlight a much deeper crisis, which in some way lies at the root of the others, and whose dramatic force was highlighted precisely by the pandemic. I refer to the crisis of politics that has been affecting many societies for some time and whose painful effects emerged during the pandemic.

One of the hallmarks of this crisis is the increase in political conflicts and the difficulty, if not actually the inability, to seek common and shared solutions to the problems afflicting our world. This has been a growing trend, one that is becoming more and more widespread also in countries with a long tradition of democracy. Vitalizing democracies is a challenge in the present historic moment[6: Cf. Address to the European Parliament, Strasburg (25 November 2014).], one that directly affects all states, whether small or large, economically advanced or in the process of development. In these days, my thoughts turn particularly to the people of

Myanmar, to whom I express my affection and closeness. The path to democracy undertaken in recent years was brusquely interrupted by last week's coup d'état. This has led to the imprisonment of different political leaders, who I hope will be promptly released as a sign of encouragement for a sincere dialogue aimed at the good of the country.

For that matter, as Pope Pius XII stated in his memorable Radio Message of Christmas 1944: "To express their own views of the duties and sacrifices that are imposed on them, and not be compelled to obey without being heard – these are two rights of citizens which find in democracy, as its name implies, their expression".[7: Radio Message to the People of the Entire World, 24 December 1944.] Democracy is based on mutual respect, on the possibility that each person can contribute to the good of society, and on the consideration that different opinions do not threaten the power and security of states, but through honest debate mutually enrich them and enable them to find more suitable solutions to pressing problems. The democratic process calls for pursuing the path of inclusive, peaceful, constructive and respectful dialogue among all the components of civil society in every city and nation. The events that in various ways and contexts, from East to West, have marked this past year also, as I mentioned, in countries with a long democratic tradition, have made clear how inescapable is this challenge, and how we cannot avoid the moral and social duty to address it positively. The development of a democratic consciousness demands that emphasis on individual personalities be overcome and that respect for the rule of law prevail. Indeed, law is the indispensable prerequisite for the exercise of all power and must be guaranteed by the responsible governing bodies, regardless of dominant political interests.

Sad to say, the crisis of politics and of democratic values is reflected also on the international level, with repercussions on the entire multilateral system and the obvious consequence that Organizations designed to foster peace and development – on the basis of law and not on the "law of the strongest" – see their effectiveness compromised. To be sure, we cannot ignore that the multilateral system has also, in recent years, shown some limitations. The pandemic is a precious opportunity to devise and implement structural reforms so that international Organizations can rediscover their essential vocation to serve the human family by protecting individual lives and peace.

One of the signs of the crisis of politics is precisely the frequently encountered reluctance to undertake paths of reform. We must not be afraid of reforms, even if they require sacrifices and often a change in our way of thinking. Every living body constantly needs to be reformed, and the reforms taking place in the Holy See and the Roman Curia also fit into this perspective.

In any case, there are a number of encouraging signs, such as the entry into force, a few days ago, of the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and the extension for another five-year period of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty ("New START") between the Russian Federation and the United States of America. As I noted in my recent Encyclical Letter Fratelli Tutti, "if we take into consideration the principal threats to peace and security with their many dimensions in this multipolar world of the twenty-first century… not a few doubts arise regarding the inadequacy of nuclear deterrence as an effective response to such challenges".[8: Message to the United Nations Conference to Negotiate a Legally Binding Instrument to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons (23 March 2017): AAS 109 (2017), 394-396; Encyclical Letter Fratelli Tutti, 262.] In fact, "a stability based on fear, when it actually increases fear and undermines relationships of trust between peoples"[9: Ibid.] is not sustainable.

Efforts in the area of disarmament and the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons that, despite difficulties and reluctance, must be intensified, should also be carried out with regard to chemical and conventional weapons. Our world has too many weapons! As Saint John XXIII observed in 1963, "justice, right reason, and the recognition of human dignity cry out insistently for a cessation to the arms race. The stockpiles of armaments which have been built up in various countries must be reduced all round and simultaneously by the parties concerned".[10: Encyclical Letter Pacem in Terris (11 April 1963), ed. Carlen, 112.] As violence increases at every level with the proliferation of weapons, and we see around us a world torn by wars and divisions, we feel an ever greater need for peace, a peace that "is not only the absence of war, but rather a life rich in meaning, rooted in and lived through personal fulfilment and fraternal sharing with others".[11: Angelus, 1 January 2021.]

How I wish that 2021 may be the year when the conflict in Syria, begun ten years ago, can finally end! For this to happen, renewed interest is needed also on the part of the international community to address the causes of the conflict with honesty and courage and to seek solutions whereby all, regardless of ethnic and religious affiliation, can contribute as citizens to the future of the country.

My desire for peace obviously extends to the Holy Land. Mutual trust between Israelis and Palestinians must be the basis for renewed direct dialogue between the parties aimed at resolving a conflict that has gone on all too long. I urge the international community to support and facilitate such direct dialogue, without presuming to

dictate solutions that would not be aimed at the good of all. Palestinians and Israelis – of this I am sure – share the desire to dwell in peace.

I also express my hope for renewed political commitment, both national and international, to fostering the stability of Lebanon, which is experiencing an internal crisis and risks losing its identity and finding itself caught up even more in regional tensions. It is most necessary that the country maintain its unique identity, not least to ensure a pluralistic, tolerant and diversified Middle East in which the Christian community can make its proper contribution and not be reduced to a minority in need of protection. Christians, with their many educational, health and charitable works, are an intrinsic part of Lebanon's historical and social fabric, and they must be guaranteed the possibility of continuing their efforts for the good of the country, of which they were founders. A weakening of the Christian presence risks destroying internal equilibrium and the very reality of Lebanon. In this regard, the presence of Syrian and Palestinian refugees must be also addressed. Moreover, without an urgently needed process of economic recovery and reconstruction, the country risks bankruptcy, with the possible effect of a dangerous drift towards fundamentalism. It is therefore necessary for all political and religious leaders to set aside their personal interests and to commit themselves to pursuing justice and implementing real reforms for the good of their fellow citizens, acting transparently and taking responsibility for their actions.

I likewise express my hope for peace in Libya, itself also devastated by a lengthy conflict, and I trust that the recent "Libyan Political Dialogue Forum", held in Tunisia last November under the aegis of the United Nations, will effectively permit the inauguration of the country's long-awaited process of reconciliation.

Other areas of the world are also a cause for concern. I am referring first of all to the political and social tensions in the Central African Republic and to those affecting Latin America in general, which are rooted in profound inequalities, injustices and poverty that offend the dignity of persons. I also follow with particular attention the deterioration of relations in the Korean Peninsula, which culminated in the destruction of the inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong, and the situation in the South Caucasus, where several conflicts continue to smoulder, some of which flared up in the past year, undermining the stability and security of the entire region.

Finally, I cannot fail to mention another serious scourge of our time: terrorism, which every year kills numerous victims among defenseless civilians throughout the world. Terrorism is an evil that has been growing since the seventies of the last century, culminating in the attacks that took place in the United States of America on 11 September 2001 that killed nearly three thousand people. Tragically, the number of terrorist attacks has intensified in the last twenty years, affecting various countries on every continent. I think of terrorist attacks above all in sub-Saharan Africa, but also in Asia and Europe. My thoughts turn to all the victims and their families, who have lost their loved ones to blind violence motivated by ideological distortions of religion. For that matter, the targets of these attacks are often precisely places of worship where believers are gathered in prayer. In this regard, I would like to stress that the protection of places of worship is a direct consequence of the defence of freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and is a duty incumbent upon the civil authorities, regardless of their political persuasion or religious affiliation.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I come to the end of these considerations, I would like to focus on one last crisis, which is perhaps the most serious of all: the crisis of human relationships, as the expression of a general anthropological crisis, dealing with the very conception of the human person and his or her transcendent dignity.

The pandemic, which forced us to endure long months of isolation and often loneliness, has brought out the need of every individual for human relationships. I think before all else of those students who were unable to attend school or university regularly. "Attempts have been made everywhere to offer a rapid response through online educational platforms. These have brought to light a marked disparity in educational and technological opportunities, but they have also made us realize that, due to the lockdown and many other already existing needs, large numbers of children and adolescents have fallen behind in the natural process of schooling".[12: Video Message for the Meeting "Global Compact on Education. Together to Look Beyond" (15 October 2020).] Furthermore, the increase in distance learning has also led to a greater dependence of children and adolescents on the internet and on virtual forms of communication in general, making them all the more vulnerable and overexposed to online criminal activities.

We are witnessing a sort of "educational catastrophe" – let me repeat this: a kind of educational catastrophe – to which we must react for the sake of generations to come and for society as a whole. "Today, there is need for a renewed commitment to an education that engages society at every level".[13: Ibid.] Education is, in fact, "a natural antidote to the individualistic culture that at times degenerates into a true cult of the self and the primacy of indifference. Our future cannot be one of division, impoverishment of thought, imagination,

attentiveness, dialogue and mutual understanding".[14: Ibid.]

At the same time, long periods of lockdown have also made it possible for families to spend more time together. For many of them, it was an important opportunity to renew their deepest relationships. Marriage and family "constitute one of the most precious of human values"[15: SAINT JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris Consortio (22 December 1981), 1.] and the foundation of every civil society. The great Pope Saint John Paul II, the centenary of whose birth we commemorated last year, noted in his insightful teachings on the family that, "nowadays, given the global dimension of various social questions, the family has seen its role in the development of society expanded in a completely new way… by presenting to their children a model of life based on the values of truth, freedom, justice and love".[16: Ibid, 48.] Even so, not everybody has been able to live with serenity in his or her own home and some forms of cohabitation have degenerated and led to domestic violence. I encourage everyone, civil and public authorities, to provide support to the victims of domestic violence: unfortunately, as we all know, women, often with children, are those who pay the highest price.

The need to halt the spread of the virus has also had implications for a number of fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom, restricting public worship and the educational and charitable activities of faith communities. It must be recognized, however, that religion is a fundamental aspect of the human person and of society, and cannot be eliminated. Even as we seek ways to protect human lives from the spread of the virus, we cannot view the spiritual and moral dimension of the human person as less important than physical health.

Freedom of worship, furthermore, is not a corollary of the freedom of assembly. It is in essence derived from the right to freedom of religion, which is the primary and fundamental human right. This right must therefore be respected, protected and defended by civil authorities, like the right to bodily and physical health. For that matter, sound care of the body can never ignore care of the soul.

In his Letter to Cangrande della Scala, Dante Alighieri states that the purpose of his Comedy is "to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and to lead them to the state of bliss".[17: Epistola XIII, 39.] This is also the work of both religious and civil authorities, in their various sectors and responsibilities. The crisis in human relationships and, consequently, the other crises I have mentioned, cannot be overcome, unless we safeguard the transcendent dignity of each human person, created in the image and likeness of God.

In mentioning the great Florentine poet, the seven-hundredth anniversary of whose death occurs this year, I would also like to address a special thought to the people of Italy, who were the first in Europe to deal with the grave effects of the pandemic. I urge them not to lose heart amid the present difficulties, but to cooperate in building a society in which no one is discarded or forgotten.

Dear Ambassadors,

2021 is a time that must not be wasted. And it will not be wasted if we can work together with generosity and commitment. In this regard, I am convinced that fraternity is the true cure for the pandemic and the many evils that have affected us. Along with vaccines, fraternity and hope are, as it were, the medicine we need in today's world.

Upon each of you and your respective countries I invoke abundant heavenly blessings, and add my prayerful good wishes that this year may be a fruitful occasion for deepening the bonds of fraternity that unite the entire human family.

Thank you!