

# Message of the Holy Father Francis for the IV World Day of the Poor (November 15, 2020)

## "Extend your hand to the poor" (cf. *Sir* 7:32)

"Extend your hand to the poor" (cf. *Sir* 7:32). Ancient wisdom has placed these words as a sacred code to follow in life. They resonate today with all their significance to help us also focus our gaze on the essentials and overcome the barriers of indifference. Poverty always takes on different faces, which require attention to each particular condition: in each of these we can meet the Lord Jesus, who has revealed that he is present in his weaker brothers (cf *Mt* 25,40).

1. Let's take *Siracide* , one of the books of the Old Testament, in our hands . Here we find the words of a master of wisdom who lived about two hundred years before Christ. He went in search of the wisdom that makes men better and capable of scrutinizing the vicissitudes of life. He did it in a time of hard trial for the people of Israel, a time of pain, mourning and misery due to the domination of foreign powers. Being a man of great faith, rooted in the traditions of the fathers, his first thought was to turn to God to ask him for the gift of wisdom. And the Lord did not let him miss his help.

From the first pages of the book, *Sirach* explains his advice on many concrete life situations, and poverty is one of them. He insists that in discomfort one must have faith in God: «Do not get lost in the time of trial. Stay united with him without parting from him, so that you may be exalted in your last days. Accept what happens to you and be patient in painful events, because gold is tested with fire and men welcome in the melting pot of pain. In diseases and poverty he trusts in him. Trust in him and he will help you, straighten your ways and hope in him. You who fear the Lord, wait for his mercy and do not deviate, so as not to fall " (2,2-7).

2. Page after page, we discover a precious compendium of suggestions on how to act in the light of an intimate relationship with God, creator and lover of creation, just and provident towards all his children. The constant reference to God, however, does not distract from looking at concrete man, on the contrary, the two things are closely connected.

This is clearly demonstrated by the passage from which the title of this Message is taken (cf. 7,29-36). Prayer to God and solidarity with the poor and suffering are inseparable. To celebrate a worship that is pleasing to the Lord, it is necessary to recognize that every person, even the most indigent and despised, carries the image of God impressed on himself. From this attention comes the gift of divine blessing, attracted by the generosity practiced towards of the poor. Therefore, the time to devote to prayer can never become an alibi to neglect the neighbor in difficulty. The opposite is true: the blessing of the Lord descends on us and prayer reaches its goal when accompanied by service to the poor.

3. How timely this ancient teaching is for us too! In fact, the Word of God goes beyond space, time, religions and cultures. The generosity that supports the weak, consoles the afflicted, soothes suffering, restores dignity to those who are deprived of it, is a condition for a fully human life. The choice to pay attention to the poor, to their many and different needs, cannot be

conditioned by the time available or by private interests, nor by disincarnate pastoral or social projects. The strength of God's grace cannot be suffocated by the narcissistic tendency to always put oneself first.

Keeping your eyes on the poor is difficult, but more necessary than ever to give the right direction to our personal and social life. It is not a question of spending so many words, but rather of concretely committing life, moved by divine charity. Every year, with the World Day of the Poor, I return to this fundamental reality for the life of the Church, because the poor are and will always be with us (cf. *Jn 12: 8*) to help us welcome the company of Christ into daily existence.

4. The meeting with a person in poverty always provokes and questions us. How can we help eliminate or at least alleviate his marginalization and suffering? How can we help you in your spiritual poverty? The Christian community is called to involve itself in this experience of sharing, in the awareness that it is not lawful for it to delegate it to others. And to be supportive of the poor it is fundamental to live evangelical poverty firsthand. We cannot feel "right" when a member of the human family is relegated to the rear and becomes a shadow. The silent cry of the many poor must find the people of God at the forefront, always and everywhere, to give them a voice, to defend them and sympathize with them before so much hypocrisy and so many unfulfilled promises,

True, the Church has no overall solutions to propose, but offers, with the grace of Christ, her testimony and gestures of sharing. Furthermore, she feels compelled to present the requests of those who do not have the necessary to live. Reminding everyone of the great value of the common good is a commitment to life for the Christian people, which is carried out in an attempt not to forget any of those whose humanity is violated in basic needs.

5. Holding out your hand makes it clear, first of all to those who do it, that within us there is the ability to make gestures that give meaning to life. How many outstretched hands are seen every day! Unfortunately, it happens more and more often that haste drags into a vortex of indifference, to the point that we no longer know how to recognize the good that is done daily in silence and with great generosity. It thus happens that, only when events occur that upset the course of our life, the eyes become capable of seeing the goodness of the saints "next door", "of those who live near us and are a reflection of the presence of God" ( *ibid.*, n. *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 7), but of which nobody speaks. Bad news abounds on the pages of newspapers, on websites and on television screens, enough to suggest that evil reigns. It is not so. Of course, there is no shortage of malice and violence, abuse and corruption, but life is interwoven with acts of respect and generosity that not only compensate for evil, but push us to go further and be full of hope.

6. Reaching out is a sign: a sign that immediately calls for closeness, solidarity, love. In these months, in which the whole world has been overwhelmed by a virus that has brought pain and death, despair and bewilderment, how many outstretched hands we have been able to see! The outstretched hand of the doctor who cares about each patient trying to find the right remedy. The outstretched hand of the nurse and nurse who, far beyond their working hours, remain to look after the sick. The outstretched hand of those who work in the administration and provide the means to save as many lives as possible. The pharmacist's outstretched hand exposed to many requests in a risky contact with people. The outstretched hand of the priest who blesses with

heartbreak in the heart. The outstretched hand of the volunteer who helps those who live on the street and how many, despite having a roof, they have no food. The outstretched hand of men and women who work to offer essential services and safety. And other outstretched hands we could still describe up to composing a litany of works of good. All these hands challenged contagion and fear in order to give support and consolation.

7. This pandemic came suddenly and caught us unprepared, leaving a great sense of disorientation and helplessness. The hand extended to the poor man, however, did not come suddenly. Rather, it offers testimony of how one prepares to recognize the poor to support him in time of need. There is no sudden instruments of mercy. Daily training is needed, starting from the awareness of how much we first need a hand stretched towards us.

This moment that we are living has put in crisis many certainties. We feel poorer and weaker because we have experienced the sense of limitation and the restriction of freedom. The loss of the job, of the dearest affections, as well as the lack of the usual interpersonal relationships have suddenly opened up horizons that we were no longer used to observing. Our spiritual and material riches have been questioned and we have discovered that we are afraid. Closed in the silence of our homes, we have rediscovered how important simplicity is and keeping our eyes fixed on the essentials. We have developed the need for a new fraternity, capable of mutual help and mutual esteem. This is a favorable time for «to feel again that we need each other, that we have a responsibility towards others and towards the world [...]. For too long we have already been in moral degradation, making fun of ethics, goodness, faith, honesty [...]. This destruction of every foundation of social life ends up pitting us against each other to defend their interests, causes the emergence of new forms of violence and cruelty and prevents the development of a true culture of caring for the environment " (Lett . enc. *Laudato si ' , 229*). In short, the serious economic, financial and political crises will not cease as long as we allow the responsibility that everyone must feel towards others and each person to remain dormant.

8. "Extend your hand to the poor", therefore, is an invitation to responsibility as a direct commitment of anyone who feels part of the same fate. It is an incitement to take on the burdens of the weakest, as St. Paul recalls: «Through love you are at the service of one another. In fact, the whole Law finds its fullness in one precept: *You will love your neighbor as yourself* . [...] Bear one another's burdens " ( *Gal 5: 13-14; 6,2*). The Apostle teaches that the freedom that has been given to us with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a responsibility for each of us to put ourselves at the service of others, especially of the weakest. This is not an optional exhortation, but a condition of the authenticity of the faith we profess.

The book of Sirach returns to our aid: it suggests concrete actions to support the weakest and also uses some suggestive images. At first he takes into consideration the weakness of those who are sad: " Do not avoid those who cry" (7,34). The pandemic period forced us to forced isolation, even preventing us from being able to console and be close to friends and acquaintances afflicted by the loss of their loved ones. And again says the sacred author: " Do not hesitate to visit a sick person " (7,35). We experienced the impossibility of being close to those who suffer, and at the same time we became aware of the fragility of our existence. In short, the Word of God never leaves us calm and continues to stimulate us to good.

9. "Reach out to the poor" brings out, by contrast, the attitude of those who hold their hands in their pockets and are not moved by poverty, of which they are often complicit. Indifference and

cynicism are their daily food. What a difference from the generous hands we have described! There are, in fact, outstretched hands to quickly touch a computer keyboard and move sums of money from one part of the world to another, decreeing the wealth of restricted oligarchies and the misery of multitudes or the failure of entire nations. There are hands stretched to accumulate money with the sale of weapons that other hands, including children, will use to sow death and poverty. There are outstretched hands that exchange doses of death in the shadows to enrich themselves and live in luxury and in ephemeral disorder. There are outstretched hands that exchange illegal favors for easy and corrupt gain. And there are also outstretched hands which in hypocritical respectability establish laws that they themselves do not observe.

In this scenario, «the excluded continue to wait. In order to support a lifestyle that excludes others, or to get excited with this selfish ideal, a globalization of indifference has developed. Almost without realizing it, we become incapable of feeling compassion in front of the cry of pain of others, we no longer cry in front of the drama of others nor do we care to care for them, as if everything were an extraneous responsibility that does not belong to us "(Esort. Ap . *Evangelii gaudium* , 54). We will not be happy until these hands that sow death are transformed into instruments of justice and peace for the whole world.

10. " In all your actions, remember your end " ( *Sir7,36*). It is the expression with which Sirach concludes this reflection. The text lends itself to a double interpretation. The first shows that we need to always keep in mind the end of our existence. Remembering the common destiny can help to lead a life of attention to those who are poorer and have not had the same possibilities. There is also a second interpretation, which rather highlights the end, the purpose towards which each one tends. It is the end of our life that requires a project to be carried out and a journey to be carried out without getting tired. Well, the aim of all our actions can only be love. This is the purpose we are walking towards and nothing must distract us from it. This love is sharing, dedication and service, but it begins with the discovery that we are first loved and awakened to love. This end appears when the child meets with the mother's smile and feels loved for the very fact of existing. Even a smile that we share with the poor is a source of love and allows us to live in joy. The outstretched hand, then, can always be enriched by the smile of those who do not weigh their presence and the help they offer, but rejoice only in living the style of the disciples of Christ.

In this journey of daily encounter with the poor, the Mother of God accompanies us, who more than any other is the Mother of the poor. The Virgin Mary knows the difficulties and sufferings of those who are marginalized up close, because she herself found herself giving birth to the Son of God in a stable. Due to the threat of Herod, she fled to another country with Joseph her husband and little Jesus, and the refugee condition marked the Holy Family for some years. May the prayer to the Mother of the poor bring together her favorite children and those who serve them in the name of Christ. And prayer transforms the outstretched hand into an embrace of sharing and of found brotherhood.

Rome, San Giovanni in Laterano, 13 June 2020, liturgical memorial of Saint Anthony of Padua.

+ **FRANCIS**