



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO THE ROMAN CURIA

*Benediction Hall
Monday, 21 December 2020*

[Multimedia]

Dear brothers and sisters,

1. The birth of Jesus of Nazareth is the mystery of a birth which reminds us that “men, though they must die, are not born in order to die, but in order to begin”,^[1] as the Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt observed in a way as striking as it is incisive. Arendt inverted the thought of her teacher Heidegger, according to whom human beings are born to be hurled towards death. Amid the ruins of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, Arendt acknowledged this luminous truth: “The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, ‘natural’ ruin is ultimately the fact of natality... It is this faith in and hope for the world that found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their ‘glad tidings’: ‘A child has been born unto us’”.^[2]

2. Contemplating the mystery of the Incarnation, before the child lying in a manger (cf. *Lk* 2:16), but also the Paschal Mystery, in the presence of the crucified one, we find our proper place only if we are defenceless, humble and unassuming. Only if we follow, wherever we live and work (including the Roman Curia), the programme of life set forth by Saint Paul: “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (*Eph* 4:31-32). Only if we are “clothed with humility” (cf. *1 Pet* 5:5) and imitate Jesus, who is “gentle and lowly in heart” (*Mt* 11:29). Only after we put ourselves “in the lowest place” (*Lk* 14:10) and become “slaves of all” (cf. *Mk* 10:44). In this regard, Saint Ignatius, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, even asks us to imagine ourselves as part of the scene before the manger. “I will become”, he writes, “a poor, lowly and unworthy slave, and as though present, gaze upon them, contemplate them and serve them in

their needs” (114, 2).

I thank the Cardinal Dean for his Christmas greetings on behalf of all. Thank you, Cardinal Re.

3. This is the Christmas of the pandemic, of the health, economic, social and even ecclesial crisis that has indiscriminately struck the whole world. The crisis is no longer a commonplace of conversations and of the intellectual establishment; it has become a reality experienced by everyone.

The pandemic has been a time of trial and testing, but also a significant opportunity for conversion and renewed authenticity.

On 27 March last, on the esplanade of Saint Peter's Basilica, before an empty Square that nonetheless brought us together, in spirit, from every corner of the world, I wished to pray for, and with, everyone. I spoke clearly about the potential significance of the “storm” (cf. *Mk* 4:35-41) that struck our world: “The storm has exposed our vulnerability and uncovered those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It has shown us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities. The tempest has laid bare all our prepackaged ideas and our forgetfulness of what nourishes our people's souls; all those attempts to anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly “save” us, but instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots and keeping alive the memory of those who have gone before us. We have lost the antibodies we needed to confront adversity. In this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away, uncovering once more that (blessed) common belonging, which we cannot evade: our belonging to one another as brothers and sisters”.

4. Providentially, it was precisely at that difficult time that I was able to write *Fratelli Tutti*, the Encyclical devoted to the theme of fraternity and social friendship. One lesson we learn from the Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth is that of the solidarity linking those who were present: Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the Magi and all who, in one way or another, offered their fraternity and friendship so that, amid the darkness of history, the Word made flesh (cf. *Jn* 1:14) could find a welcome. As I stated at the beginning of the Encyclical: “It is my desire that, in this our time, by acknowledging the dignity of each human person, we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity. Brotherhood between all men and women. ‘Here we have a splendid secret that shows us how to dream and to turn our life into a wonderful adventure. No one can face life in isolation... We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead. How important it is to dream together... By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together’.[3] Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and

convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all” (No. 8).

5. The crisis of the pandemic is a fitting time to reflect briefly on the *meaning of a crisis*, which can prove beneficial to us all.

A crisis is something that affects everyone and everything. Crises are present everywhere and in every age of history, involving ideologies, politics, the economy, technology, ecology and religion. A crisis is a necessary moment in the history of individuals and society. It appears as an extraordinary event that always creates a sense of trepidation, anxiety, upset and uncertainty in the face of decisions to be made. We see this in the etymological root of the verb *krino*: a crisis is the sifting that separates the wheat from the chaff after the harvest.

The Bible itself is filled with individuals who were “sifted”, “people in crisis” who by that very crisis played their part in the history of salvation.

The crisis of *Abraham*, who left his native land (*Gen* 21:1-2) and underwent the great test of having to sacrifice to God his only son (*Gen* 22:1-19), resulted, from a theological standpoint, in the birth of a new people. Yet this did not spare Abraham from experiencing a dramatic situation in which confusion and disorientation did not get the upper hand, due to the strength of his faith.

The crisis of *Moses* can be seen in his lack of self-confidence. “Who am I”, he says, “that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (*Ex* 3:11); “I am not eloquent... I am slow of speech and of tongue” (*Ex* 4:10), “a man of uncircumcised lips” (*Ex* 6:12.30). For this reason, he tried to evade the mission entrusted to him by God: “Lord, please send someone else” (cf. *Ex* 4:13). Yet out of this crisis God was to make Moses the servant who would lead his people out of Egypt.

Elijah, the prophet whose strength was like that of fire (cf. *Sir* 48:1), at a moment of great crisis longed for death, but then experienced the presence of God, not in a rushing wind or an earthquake or fire, but in a “still small voice” (cf. *1 Kings* 19:11-12). The voice of God is never the *tumultuous* voice of the crisis, but rather the *quiet* voice that speaks *in* the crisis.

John the Baptist was gripped by uncertainty about whether Jesus was the Messiah (cf. *Mt* 11.2-6) because he did not come as the harsh vindicator that John was perhaps expecting (cf. *Mt* 3:11-12). Yet John’s imprisonment set the stage for Jesus’ preaching of the Kingdom of God (cf. *Mk* 1:14).

Then there is the “theological” crisis experienced by *Paul of Tarsus*. Overwhelmed by his dramatic encounter with Christ on the way to Damascus (cf. *Acts* 9:1-19; *Gal* 1:15-16), he was moved to leave everything behind to follow Jesus (cf. *Phil* 3:4-10). Saint Paul was truly one open to being changed by a crisis. For this reason, he was to be the author of the crisis that led the Church to

pass beyond the borders of Israel and go forth to the very ends of the earth.

We could continue with this list of biblical figures, in which each of us could find his or her own place. There are so many of them...

Yet the most eloquent crisis was that of *Jesus*. The Synoptic Gospels point out that he began his public life by experiencing the crisis of temptation. It might seem that the central character in this situation was the devil with his false promises, yet the real protagonist was the Holy Spirit. For he was guiding Jesus at this decisive moment in his life: "Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (*Mt 4:1*).

The Evangelists stress that the forty days Jesus spent in the desert were marked by the experience of hunger and weakness (cf. *Mt 4:2*; *Lk 4:2*). It was precisely from the depths of this hunger and weakness that the evil one sought to make his final move, taking advantage of Jesus' human fatigue. Yet in that man weak from fasting the tempter experienced the presence of the Son of God who could overcome temptation by the word of God, and not his own. Jesus never enters into dialogue with the devil. We need to learn from this. There can be no dialogue with the devil. Jesus either casts him out or forces him to reveal his name. With the devil, there can be no dialogue.

Jesus was then to face an indescribable crisis in Gethsemane: solitude, fear, anguish, the betrayal of Judas and abandonment by his Apostles (cf. *Mt 26:36-50*). Finally, there was the extreme crisis on the cross: an experience of solidarity with sinners even to the point of feeling abandoned by the Father (cf. *Mt 27:46*). Yet with utter confidence he "commended his spirit into the hands of the Father" (cf. *Lk 23:46*). His complete and trusting surrender opened the way to the resurrection (cf. *Heb 5:7*).

6. Brothers and sisters, this reflection on crisis warns us against judging the Church hastily on the basis of the crises caused by scandals past and present. The prophet Elijah can serve as an example. Giving vent to his frustrations before the Lord, Elijah presented him with a tale of hopelessness: "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they are seeking my life, to take it away" (*1 Kings 19:14*). Often our own assessments of ecclesial life also sound like tales of hopelessness. Yet a hopeless reading of reality cannot be termed realistic. Hope gives to our assessments an aspect that in our myopia we are often incapable of seeing. God replied to Elijah by telling him that reality was other than what he thought: "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus... Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him" (*1 Kings 19:15.18*). It was not true that Elijah was alone; he was in crisis.

God continues to make the seeds of his kingdom grow in our midst. Here in the Curia, there are

many people bearing quiet witness by their work, humble and discreet, free of idle chatter, unassuming, faithful, honest and professional. So many of you are like that, and I thank you. Our times have their own problems, yet they also have a living witness to the fact that the Lord has not abandoned his people. The only difference is that problems immediately end up in the newspapers; this has always been the case, whereas signs of hope only make the news much later, if at all.

Those who fail to view a crisis in the light of the Gospel simply perform an autopsy on a cadaver. They see the crisis, but not the hope and the light brought by the Gospel. We are troubled by crises not simply because we have forgotten how to see them as the Gospel tells us to, but because we have forgotten that the Gospel is the first to put us in crisis.^[4] If we can recover the courage and humility to admit that a time of crisis is a time of the Spirit, whenever we are faced with the experience of darkness, weakness, vulnerability, contradiction and loss, we will no longer feel overwhelmed. Instead, we will keep trusting that things are about to take a new shape, emerging exclusively from the experience of a grace hidden in the darkness. “For gold is tested in the fire and those found acceptable, in the furnace of humiliation” (*Sir 2:5*).

7. Finally, I would urge you not to confuse crisis with *conflict*. They are two different things. Crisis generally has a positive outcome, whereas conflict always creates discord and competition, an apparently irreconcilable antagonism that separates others into friends to love and enemies to fight. In such a situation, only one side can win.

Conflict always tries to find “guilty” parties to scorn and stigmatize, and “righteous” parties to defend, as a means of inducing an (often magical) sense that certain situations have nothing to do with us. This loss of the sense of our common belonging helps to create or consolidate certain elitist attitudes and “cliques” that promote narrow and partial mind-sets that weaken the universality of our mission. “In the midst of conflict, we lose our sense of the profound unity of reality” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 226).

When the Church is viewed in terms of *conflict* – right versus left, progressive versus traditionalist – she becomes fragmented and polarized, distorting and betraying her true nature. She is, on the other hand, a body in continual *crisis*, precisely because she is alive. She must never become a body in conflict, with winners and losers, for in this way she would spread apprehension, become more rigid and less synodal, and impose a uniformity far removed from the richness and plurality that the Spirit has bestowed on his Church.

The newness born of crisis and willed by the Spirit is never a newness opposed to the old, but one that springs from the old and makes it continually fruitful. Jesus explains this process in a simple and clear image: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (*Jn 12:24*). The dying of a seed is ambivalent: it is both an end and the beginning of something new. It can be called both “death and decay” and “birth and

blossoming”, for the two are one. We see an end, while at the same time, in that end a new beginning is taking shape.

In this sense, our unwillingness to enter into crisis and to let ourselves be led by the Spirit at times of trial condemns us to remaining forlorn and fruitless, or even in conflict. By shielding ourselves from crisis, we hinder the work of God’s grace, which would manifest itself in us and through us. If a certain realism leads us to see our recent history only as a series of mishaps, scandals and failings, sins and contradictions, short-circuits and setbacks in our witness, we should not fear. Nor should we deny everything in ourselves and in our communities that is evidently tainted by death and calls for conversion. Everything evil, wrong, weak and unhealthy that comes to light serves as a forceful reminder of our need to die to a way of living, thinking and acting that does not reflect the Gospel. Only by dying to a certain mentality will we be able to make room for the newness that the Spirit constantly awakens in the heart of the Church. The Fathers of the Church were well aware of this, and they called it “metanoia”.

8. Every crisis contains a rightful demand for renewal and a step forward. If we really desire renewal, though, we must have the courage to be completely open. We need to stop seeing the reform of the Church as putting a patch on an old garment, or simply drafting a new Apostolic Constitution. The reform of the Church is something different.

It cannot be a matter of putting a patch here or there, for the Church is not just an item of Christ’s clothing, but rather his Body, which embraces the whole of history (cf. *1 Cor 12:27*). We are not called to change or reform the Body of Christ – “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever” (*Heb 13:8*) – but we are called to clothe that Body with a new garment, so that it is clear that the grace we possess does not come from ourselves but from God. Indeed, “we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us” (*2 Cor 4:7*). The Church is always an earthen vessel, precious for what it contains and not for how it looks. Later, I will have the pleasure of giving you a book, a gift of Father Ardura, which shows the life of one earthen vessel that radiated the greatness of God and the reforms of the Church. These days it seems evident that the clay of which we are made is chipped, damaged and cracked. We have to strive all the more, lest our frailty become an obstacle to the preaching of the Gospel rather than a testimony to the immense love with which God, who is rich in mercy, has loved us and continues to love us (cf. *Eph 2:4*). If we cut God, who is rich in mercy, out of our lives, our lives would be a lie, a falsehood.

In times of crisis, Jesus warns us against certain attempts to emerge from it that are doomed from the start. If someone “tears a piece from a new garment to put it upon an old garment” the result is predictable: he will tear the new, because “the piece from the new will not match the old”. Similarly, “no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. New wine must be put into new wineskins” (*Lk 5:36-38*).

The right approach, on the other hand, is that of the “scribe, who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven”, who “is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Mt 13:52). That treasure is Tradition, which, as [Benedict XVI](#) recalled, “is the living river that links us to the origins, the living river in which the origins are ever present, the great river that leads us to the gates of eternity” ([Catechesis, 26 April 2006](#)). I think of the saying of that great German musician: “Tradition is the guarantee of the future, not a museum, an urn of ashes”. The “old” is the truth and grace we already possess. The “new” are those different aspects of the truth that we gradually come to understand. No historical form of living the Gospel can exhaust its full comprehension. There are those words from the fifth century: “Ut annis scilicet consolidetur, dilatetur tempore, sublimetur aetate”: that is what tradition is, and how it grows. If we let ourselves be guided by the Holy Spirit, we will daily draw closer to “all the truth” (Jn 16:13). Without the grace of the Holy Spirit, on the other hand, we can even start to imagine a “synodal” Church that, rather than being inspired by communion with the presence of the Spirit, ends up being seen as just another democratic assembly made up of majorities and minorities. Like a parliament, for example: and this is not synodality. Only the presence of the Holy Spirit makes the difference.

9. What should we do during a crisis? First, accept it as a time of grace granted us to discern God’s will for each of us and for the whole Church. We need to enter into the apparent paradoxical notion that “when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10). We should keep in mind the reassuring words of Saint Paul to the Corinthians: “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor 10:13).

It is essential not to interrupt our dialogue with God, however difficult this may prove. Praying is not easy. We must not tire of praying constantly (cf. Lk 21:36; 1 Thess 5:17). We know of no other solution to the problems we are experiencing than that of praying more fervently and at the same time doing everything in our power with greater confidence. Prayer will allow us to “hope against all hope” (cf. Rom 4:18).

10. Dear brothers and sisters, let us maintain great peace and serenity, in the full awareness that all of us, beginning with myself, are only “unworthy servants” (Lk 17:10) to whom the Lord has shown mercy. For this reason, it would be good for us to stop living in conflict and feel once more that we are journeying together, open to crisis. Journeys always involve verbs of movement. A crisis is itself movement, a part of our journey. Conflict, on the other hand, is a false trail leading us astray, aimless, directionless and trapped in a labyrinth; it is a waste of energy and an occasion for evil. The first evil that conflict leads us to, and which we must try to avoid, is gossip. Let us be attentive to this! Talking about gossip is not an obsession of mine; it is the denunciation of an evil that enters the Curia. Here in the Palace, there are many doors and windows, and it enters and we get used to this. Gossip traps us in an unpleasant, sad and stifling state of self-absorption. It turns crisis into conflict. The Gospel tells us that the shepherds believed the angel’s message and set out on the path towards Jesus (cf. Lk 2:15-16). Herod, on the other hand, closed his heart before

the story told by the Magi and turned that closed-heartedness to deceit and violence (cf. *Mt* 2:1-16).

Each of us, whatever our place in the Church, should ask whether we want to follow Jesus with the docility of the shepherds or with the defensiveness of Herod, to follow him amid crisis or to keep him at bay in conflict.

Allow me to ask expressly of all of you, who join me in the service of the Gospel, for the Christmas gift of your generous and whole-hearted cooperation in proclaiming the Good News above all to the poor (cf. *Mt* 11:5). Let us remember that they alone truly know God who welcome the poor, who come from below in their misery, yet as such are sent from on high. We cannot see God's face, but we can experience it in his turning towards us whenever we show respect for our neighbour, for others who cry out to us in their need.^[5] For the poor, who are the centre of the Gospel. I think of what that saintly Brazilian bishop used to say: "When I am concerned for the poor, they call me a saint; but when I keep asking why such great poverty exists, they call me a communist".

Let no one willfully hinder the work that the Lord is accomplishing at this moment, and let us ask for the gift to serve in humility, so that he can increase and we decrease (cf. *Jn* 3:30).

I offer my best wishes to each and all of you, and to your families and friends. Thank you, thank you for your work, thank you so very much. And please, continue to pray for me, so that I can have the courage to remain in crisis. Happy Christmas! Thank you.

[Blessing]

I forgot to tell you that I am going to give you the gift of two books. One is the life of Charles de Foucauld, a teacher of crisis, who left us a beautiful legacy. It is a gift I received from Father Ardura, whom I thank. The other is called [in Italian] "Olotropia: The Words of Christian Familiarity", words which help us live our life. The book was just published and was written by a biblical scholar and disciple of Cardinal Martini; he worked in Milan but is a priest of the Diocese of Albenga-Imperia.

[1] *The Human Condition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 246.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 247.

[3] *Address at the Ecumenical and Interreligious Meeting with Young People*, Skopje, North Macedonia (7 May 2019): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 9 May 2019, p. 9.

[4] "Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?' But

Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples murmured at it, said to them, ‘Do you take offense at this?’” (*Jn* 6:60-61). Yet it was only on the basis of that crisis that a profession of faith could spring up: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (*Jn* 6:68).

[5] Cf. E. LEVINAS, *Totalité et infini*, Paris, 2000, 76.