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Audience with the members of the Italian Union for the Fight Against Muscular Dystrophy (UILDM)

At midday today, in the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the Italian Union for the Fight Against Muscular Dystrophy (UILDM).

The following is the Pope's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I address a cordial greeting to you all, representatives of the Italian Union for the Fight Against Muscular Dystrophy. I thank the president for his words, and express my appreciation for the generous activity of your members and volunteers in your local sections, located throughout the entire national territory, in the service of people affected by dystrophy and other neuromuscular pathologies. For them you are like rays of hope, that alleviate moments of solitude and discomfort and encourage them to face the disease with trust and serenity.

Your presence alongside these people guarantees friendly assistance, offering them valuable services in the medical and social fields. Besides concrete help in facing everyday life, such as transportation, physiotherapy and care at home, also human warmth, fraternal dialogue and the tenderness with which you dedicate yourself to the users of your structures are important. Physical rehabilitation can and must be accompanied by spiritual rehabilitation, which is made up primarily of gestures of nearness, to combat not only physical pain, but also the moral suffering of abandonment or isolation.

Among the characteristics of your service there is the gratuity of service, combined with independence from interests or partisan ideologies. Gratitude that is accompanied, however, with professionalism and continuity. This is demanded of your members, as well as other virtues: discretion, fidelity, attention, promptness and effectiveness in intervention, ability to understand even the unexpressed problems of the patient, humility, seriousness, determination, punctuality, perseverance and respect for the patient in his every need. I encourage

you to continue on this path, increasingly becoming witnesses of solidarity and evangelical charity. Your precious work, in fact, is a peculiar factor of humanization: thanks to the various forms of service that your association promotes and concretizes, it makes society more attentive to the dignity of man and his many expectations.

Through the activity you carry out, you are also able to experience that, only if you love and give to others, does the person fully realize himself. Jesus, the Son of God made man, communicates to us the profound reason for this human experience. By manifesting the face of God Who is love (cf. *1 Jn 4: 8*), He reveals to man that the supreme law of his being is love. In the earthly life Jesus made divine tenderness visible: "He made Himself nothing, by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (*Phil 2: 7*) Sharing our earthly life unto death, Jesus taught us to journey in love.

Charity represents the most eloquent form of evangelical witness because, responding to concrete needs, it reveals to man the love of God, provident and father, always caring for each person. Following this teaching, many Christian men and women, throughout the centuries, have written stupendous pages on love for neighbour. I think, among others, of the priests and saints Giuseppe Cottolengo, Luigi Guanella and Luigi Orione: their charity left a profound imprint on Italian society. In our times too many people, dedicated to their neighbours, have arrived at the point of rediscovering faith, because in the sick they have encountered Christ, the Son of God. He asks to be served in the weakest of our brothers, He speaks to the heart of those who place themselves at their service and makes them experience the joy of unselfish love, the love that is the source of true happiness.

Dear brothers and sisters, the help you offer is important, but even more so is the heart with which it is offered. You are called to be a "gymnasium" of life, especially for young people, helping to educate them in a culture of solidarity and acceptance, open to the needs of the most fragile people. And this happens through the great lesson of suffering: a lesson that comes from sick and suffering people and that no other professorship can give. Those who suffer more understand the value of the divine gift of life, to be promoted, guarded and protected from conception until its natural end.

To all of you, managers, members and volunteers, I thank you for your efforts. And I encourage you to continue on your journey, with your family, friends and all those close to you. May you imitate the Virgin Mary who, rushing to help her cousin Elizabeth, became a messenger of joy and salvation (cf. *Lk 1: 39-45*). May you teach the style of humble and active charity and obtain from the Lord the grace to recognize it in the suffering. To you, people who are sick, who are present here, I express my affection and my closeness. I ask you all, please, to pray for me, and I cordially impart to you my Apostolic Blessing.
