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Audience with members of Associations, Congregations and Movements dedicated to Mercy in France

This morning the Holy Father Francis received in audience, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the members of associations, congregations and movements dedicated to mercy that are active in France.

The following is the Holy Father's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I thank you for this visit, on the occasion of your pilgrimage to Rome as representatives of associations, congregations and movements dedicated to divine mercy. I thank Cardinal Barbarin for the words with which he introduced our meeting. What unites you is the desire to make known to the world the joy of mercy through the diversity of your charisms: with people in precarious situations, with migrants, the sick, prisoners, people with disabilities, and wounded families. This diversity that you represent is very beautiful: it expresses well the fact that there is no human poverty that God does not want to reach, touch and help. "The Church is commissioned to announce the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel, which in its own way must penetrate the heart and mind of every person" (Bull *Misericordiae vultus*, 12).

Mercy is, indeed, the ultimate and supreme act with which God comes to meet us and which opens our hearts to the hope of being loved forever, whatever our poverty, whatever our sin. God's love for us is not an abstract word. It has become visible and tangible in Jesus Christ. For this reason, "this is the path which the merciful love of Christians must also travel. As the Father loves, so do His children. Just as He is merciful, we are called to be merciful to each other" (*ibid.*, 9).

In the Bull calling for the Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordiae vultus*, I expressed my hope that, in the perspective of the new evangelization which the world so badly needs, "the theme of mercy" would be "proposed again and

again with new enthusiasm and renewed pastoral action. It is absolutely essential for the Church and for the credibility of her message that she herself live and testify to mercy. Her language and her gestures must transmit mercy, so as to touch the hearts of all people and inspire them once more to find the road that leads to the Father” (*ibid.*, 12).

I see, and I rejoice, that there are many in the Church in France who, with the support and encouragement of their pastors, listen to this appeal. And it is beautiful that you do it together, that you find together ways to meet each other to pray and share, to share your difficulties and experiences, but above all your joys and gratitude, because there is a real joy in proclaiming the mercy of the Lord, of He who kneeled before His disciples to wash their feet and said: “Blessed are you if you do these things” (cf. *Jn* 13: 17) (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 24). I hope that you will be able to find ways to bear witness around you to this joy of evangelizing by proclaiming God’s mercy, to pass on His passion to others and to spread in the world the culture of mercy it urgently needs.

And so that you may do this, I would like to invite you to be always very attentive to keep alive, first of all in the depths of your hearts, this mercy of which you bear witness. May the sometimes very demanding and tiring fulfilment of your charitable activities never stifle the breath of tenderness and compassion by which they must be inspired, nor the gaze which expresses it. Not a look from above with condescension, but the look of a brother and sister, that elevates. This is the first thing that the people you help must find in you, because they first need to feel understood, appreciated, respected and loved. And then another thing, which is not written but then the Cardinal will translate for you. There is only one legitimate way to look at a person from above to below, only one way: to help them rise up. Otherwise, you can never look down on a person. Just like you do: to help them lift themselves up.

On the other hand, I believe that you can only be authentic apostles of mercy if you are profoundly aware that you have been the object of mercy from the Father, and also, with humility, that you are still the object of mercy while we exercise it. Saint John Paul II wrote: “We must also continually purify all our actions and all our intentions in which mercy is understood and practiced in a unilateral way [...]. An act of merciful love is only really such when we are deeply convinced at the moment that we perform it that we are at the same time receiving mercy from the people who are accepting it from us. If this bilateral and reciprocal quality is absent, our actions are not yet true acts of mercy” (*Dives in Misericordia*, 14).

In this time of preparation for Christmas, I propose that you contemplate the Nativity display. It invites us to “‘feel’ and ‘touch’ the poverty that God’s Son took upon himself in the Incarnation. Implicitly it summons us to follow Him along the path of humility, poverty and self-denial that leads from the manger of Bethlehem to the Cross. It asks us to meet Him and serve Him by showing mercy to those of our brothers and sisters in greatest need (cf. *Mt* 25: 31-46)”. (Apostolic Letter *Admirabile signum*, 3), and I hope that you will be strongly encouraged and renewed in your dedication.

I thank you once again for this visit, and I wish you, your families and communities joyful Christmas celebrations. And please do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.
