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Audience with members of the “Asociación Agraria Jóvenes Agricultores”, Spain

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the “Asociación Agraria Jóvenes Agricultores”, Spain, to whom he addressed the following words of greeting:

Greeting of the Holy Father

Dear young people,

I thank you for your interest in this visit, for the enthusiasm you show for your work in the countryside and for the livestock, and for the service you wish to provide to society.

As in so many facets of life, environmentalism is not primarily built up by the scholarly reports of specialists, nor by the news and informative projects that reach ordinary people through the mass media. These may be necessary, they can be beneficial, if they are done with conscience, but they are not in first place. You know that Argentina is fundamentally a livestock farming country and, although I am from the city, I have had the opportunity to get to know the reality of the countryside. This has allowed me to realize that the first ecologists of an area, of a country, of a continent are you, those who are in the arena, those who are on the inside: the people who work with the animals, with the plants, who coexist day by day and know about their problems and their achievements. I remember once, in the faculty of theology, one of the students, who was born in the city, who lived in the city and all the rest, came and said, “a cow is dying”, because within the faculty we had a field and there was livestock. “A cow is dying and there is no-one in charge”, and it was late on Saturday. I got up and went to see the cow, and the poor cow was standing there, giving birth, and that boy who was from the city, who had been raised on cement ever since childhood, did not have the faintest idea of how to distinguish a dying cow from a calving cow. There I realized that there is knowledge that is acquired only through life and experience.

You do not repeat a slogan by heart, you live by looking at the sky and, from when you rise to when you go to bed, you recognize in the chirping, bellowing or neighing you hear the joy or fear, the longing or the fulfilment of nature around you. This is an honour and, clearly, a great responsibility.

If you think about it, the vocation to which God has called you makes you witnesses to an integral ecology that the world needs today. A primal vocation, because it is rooted in God's words in Genesis when he invited humanity to collaborate in the task of creation through its work (cf. *Gen* 1:28-31). A multidisciplinary vocation, since it combines a direct relationship with the earth, its care and cultivation, with its service to society. What then does God ask of you in this work, in this activity? He asks you to think of the countryside as a gift, as something that has been given to you and that you will bequeath to your children; to think of production as a gift that the Lord, through you, and through your work, sends to his people to satiate their hunger and quench their thirst. A hunger that is not only for bread, but also for God, who, in order to satiate it, did not hesitate to make himself food, to become flesh, thus reaching the heart of man (cf. *Mt* 4:3-4; *Jn* 6:55-57).

From this fundamental value, for which I thank you, comes the responsibility entrusted to you, in the first person, but also to all those who, in some way, participate in food production, processing and distribution. It is necessary to work so that this immense good that God gives us is not transformed into a weapon - for example, by restricting the arrival of food to populations in conflict - or into a mechanism of speculation, manipulating the price and marketing of products for the sole purpose of obtaining a greater benefit. This is what we must denounce, what must make our hearts ache; the animals you care for with such dedication do not deserve it, the people for whom you work so enthusiastically do not deserve it, God does not deserve it. It offends them and it would offend you.

But do not be discouraged: every vocation has its cross, one accepts the effort of hard work, and with animals there are no days off, nor are their strikes. It is even more difficult to accept the incomprehension of those who do not give value to something as essential to life as food production, or who prefer to look for culprits instead of solutions. I entrust the work you carry out to the Blessed Virgin, so that you may always feel close to Jesus, who on the cross offered his flesh and blood, became food, became life to give it to us in abundance. Go forth and be poets of the earth. Thank you.
