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SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

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Audience with volunteers and persons assisted by UNITALSI

This morning, in the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the volunteers and people with illnesses and disabilities assisted by UNITALSI, on the occasion of the 120th anniversary of its founding.

The following is the address delivered by the Pope to those present at the audience:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome to you all!

I am pleased to meet the Italian National Union for the Transport of the Sick to Lourdes and International Sanctuaries (UNITALSI), established 120 years ago. Your numerous and variegated presence – people with illnesses and disabilities, volunteers, stretcher bearers, families, health workers, young people, priests - testifies to the beauty of a Church that knows how to accompany, a Church that knows how to care for the weakest, a Church that knows how to proclaim the Gospel in hard-working charity. Thank you, thank you very much for what you do! Do not tire of going against the grain in a world that, in the name of wellbeing and efficiency at all costs, marginalizes and discards. I encourage you in your valuable service, and I do so referring to the symbol you placed in your anniversary logo: the staff and the sandal, signs of the pilgrim, and the Virgin. An invitation to conserve the spirit of the pilgrimage, inspired by the Gospel, and to keep your gaze on Mary.

The *pilgrimage* is at the centre of your work, since young Giovanni Battista Tomassi, suffering from irreversible deforming arthritis, founded UNITALSI after experiencing the comfort of prayer during a trip to Lourdes. In the Marian city he had imagined taking his own life, but instead, there he found the profound meaning of his being, there he found the strength of faith. Today too the pilgrimages you organize are a balm for the wounds of many people with disabilities, the sick, the elderly and those in need of help, whom you accompany to Lourdes and the main Italian and foreign sanctuaries. They are journeys for life, journeys of healing – in various dimensions – that promote the dignity of every human existence, especially those marked by sickness, fragility and suffering. In pilgrims – as we all are in this world – the face of Christ is reflected, He who took on himself our infirmities so as

to imbue them with the strength of the Resurrection.

The experience of the pilgrimage embodies the values of welcome, hospitality, solidarity, and your initiatives place the healthy and sick, elderly and young, consecrated and laity, on the same path; it thus becomes a living sign of a Church that walks together, that supports those who are unable, and does not want to leave anyone behind. It is the image of a Church as a “field hospital” that, like the good Samaritan, approaches with compassion and binds up wounds, pouring on oil and wine (cf. *Lk 10: 34*). And all in silence, all with discretion, because in the face of suffering words must leave space for closeness and gestures of tenderness. Please remember: let this always be your style!

Your Association, widespread and rooted throughout Italy, assures a point of reference for families and communities, carrying out the function of a guardian for life in conditions of fragility. At the same time, it performs a task of evangelization and apostolate. It does so *sine glossa*, as Saint Francis would say, or rather with facts, by example, with a proclamation that has the flavour of tangibility. This is a language that can speak to all, as we see in the Gospel, when the people were looking for Jesus, because in him they felt the strength of God who heals, of God who forgives, of God who consoles, of God who gives hope. May the Word of God always be your nourishment and also your “staff”, that supports you on your journey, so that you do not falter even when the road becomes arduous and your strength seems to fail.

And then, dear friends, trust in *Mary*. Her embrace is often the end point of your pilgrimages. Continue to look for her, to contemplate her, to invoke her, to place at her feet the hardship, anguish and pain that each person carries with them. On this anniversary you wanted the image of Our Lady of Lourdes to visit Italy, with a *peregrination* through the local Sections, involving thousands of people, in the Churches, in hospitals, in rest and reception homes, in prisons. And today she has arrived here too. Thank you very much!

In these days leading to Christmas, the figure of Mary appears even more familiar, closer to us: let us look to her and let ourselves be looked at by her, to learn to say “yes”, to welcome God’s plans without fear, and to take care of the smallest and most defenceless. May she, the pilgrim Mother in faith and hope, accompany the steps of your Association. I bless you all, and I bless your service. And please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.
