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Press Conference to present the Message of the Holy Father Francis for Lent 2024

Intervention of His Eminence Cardinal Michael Czerny, S.J.

Intervention of Don Andrea Cavallini

Intervention of Professor Emilia Palladino

Intervention of Mauro Pallotta ("Maupal")

At 11.30 this morning, a press conference was livestreamed from the Holy See Press Office to present the Message of the Holy Father Francis for Lent 2024, on the theme: "Through the desert God leads us to freedom".

The speakers were: His Eminence Cardinal Michael Czerny, S.J., prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development; the Reverend Don Andrea Cavallini, head of the Office for Catechesis of the diocese of Rome; Professor Emilia Palladino, associate professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the Pontifical Gregorian University; and Mauro Pallotta (aka "Maupal"), artist.

The following are their interventions:

Intervention of His Eminence Cardinal Michael Czerny, S.J.

Thank you, journalists, for your valuable work in receiving, contextualising and communicating the 2024 Message. Thank you, speakers, for bringing your wisdom to help everyone receive it in all its power. And of course, thank you, Holy Father, for giving us such an inspiring reflection at the beginning of Lent.

From the very first lines, the message emphasizes freedom, a message of freedom and for freedom. At a time when many, too many, huge difficulties weigh everyone down, the Gospel opens up a path in the desert and announces that our enslavement is already over and truly ended. Indeed, the exodus journey is necessarily long, not only to reach the Promised Land, but above all to choose genuine freedom. For the freedom offered must be desired and embraced. Not even God can do this for us.

When we speak of the integral human development that the Church wants to serve, we think of the 'life in abundance' that Jesus came to bring (John 10:10). Lent brings to light the many personal and social obstacles that stand in the way, before such life in abundance, promoted by the Church, can be realized among peoples. The Pope's message for this year's Lent addresses the journeys of individuals, Churches and peoples – first, journeys in the desert and, then, journeys of faith towards the possibility of hope. To hope means both to trust in God and to look forward in history. To hope allows the Spirit to overcome fears and obstacles. One becomes willing to commit oneself actively, even willing to pay the price personally, so that the Kingdom of God may come to many.

Pope Francis does not lack concreteness. After recalling "those moments when we feel hopeless, wandering through life like a desert and lacking a promised land as our destination," the Pope observes: "Today too, the cry of so many of our oppressed brothers and sisters rises to heaven. Let us ask ourselves: Do we hear that cry? Does it trouble us? Does it move us?"

Questions like these may be an unusual introduction to Lent. Traditionally, Lent is a time to review our lives and to individually face the need for personal conversion.

However, fraternity is surely an excellent horizon against which to question ourselves and our vocation as believers, as citizens. Where are we on the journey with so many siblings at home and worldwide who cry out and ask us to walk with them?

Pope Francis's message reminds us that Pharaoh's domination is not only external but also interior. Our thoughts and hearts can still easily fall under his power. It is "a rule that makes us weary and indifferent. A model of growth that divides and robs us of a future. Earth, air and water are polluted, but so are our souls. True, Baptism has begun our process of liberation, yet there remains in us an inexplicable longing for slavery. A kind of attraction to the security of familiar things, to the detriment of our freedom."

Here are the main themes of the encyclicals *Laudato si'* and *Fratelli tutti*. Here we see the pastoral paradigms of integral ecology, fraternity and social friendship reshaping evangelisation, not because the Gospel changes, but because it is this very broken world that must receive the Good News, in the midst of "a third world war fought piecemeal".

Life and faith are intimately united. By embracing the gift of Lent, every Christian community can accompany its members in facing the challenges of our time. For, believe it or not, the hoped-for changes in the world begin with change in me and in you. While already on the way, we must choose to keep on going and go further. This is Pope Francis's Lenten message.

Intervention of Don Andrea Cavallini

My role in the diocese of Rome regards educating in the faith: I am in charge of training catechists and catechetical courses, especially Christian initiation.

Lent is the quintessential time of Christian initiation, it is the "sacramental sign of our conversion" (Collect of the first Sunday of Lent). Let us think about how, in the early Christian centuries, the idea arose of living communally a forty-day period of preparation for Easter with a path marked by some particular gospel passages and

gestures of penance, such as ashes and fasting. Two categories of people were the protagonists of ancient Lent: the catechumens and the penitents, that is, those who were to be baptized at Easter and those who had to do penance for serious sins committed publicly. The intuition, already very ancient, from which Lent was born was to extend the path that these two categories (catechumens and penitents) lived to all Christians: all Christians had to listen to the same gospels as the catechumens and fast like the penitents. As if to say: we all need to become Christians again, because even if we already are, in reality we are not yet. This is the fundamental meaning of Lent: we need Christian initiation, to start again from the essential, to begin anew. It is not a question of being a little more Christian in deeds, of praying a little more or giving more alms, but of something radical: it is about conversion.

Every year the papal Messages focus on an aspect of Lent, that is, an aspect of conversion: this year it is the beautiful theme of freedom, which is indeed a radical theme. Being free or not being free are completely different. It is a matter of life or death, happiness or unhappiness. The good news of Lent is that God frees and calls to freedom. God is the ally of man's freedom.

We know that the first place of freedom, or its lack, is our heart. Alongside the exterior and social dimension of freedom, there is an inner one. The story from the Book of Exodus, recalled in this year's Message, is emblematic: the people of Israel have been freed from Pharaoh's slavery, but they carry slavery in their hearts. It is outwardly free and inwardly enslaved. Paradoxically, it does not long for freedom, the Promised Land, rather it regrets slavery, Egypt. This is an image of our heart, which carries within itself slavery: we are enslaved by the desire for power, to assert ourselves, to be approved and recognized; we are caged because we are attached "to money, to certain projects, ideas, goals, to our position, to a tradition, even to certain people". And we are addicted to our inner bondages. We are not prisoners eager to escape, nor slaves trying to escape. If no one helps us, we do not realize that it is this lack of inner freedom that ruins our lives. I am reminded of the wonderful image Plato uses in the *Republic*: men are like prisoners in a cave, convinced that there is only what they see inside the cave, unaware of the existence of an outside world. Unless someone breaks free and discovers another world for them and tells them about it, they do not even suspect that they are prisoners (*Resp.* VII, 514b-520a).

Now, who performs this service of liberation for us? Who is it who proclaims a different life? It is the Word of God. This is why Lent offers us first of all the Word of God, which is full of the Spirit of freedom. It is the Word that makes us aware of our lack of freedom, because it shows us a truer, freer, more loving way of living, and thus kindles the desire in our heart. In some way, listening to the Word, we see our life with God's eyes, which are free eyes, that see us already holy, already free, already loving. As in the story of Exodus: God sees an enslaved people and dreams of a free people. And He involves Moses in His dream. Moses could be the image of the evangelizer, and learns to look at others through God's eyes, that is, to proclaim to everyone that there is freedom to be won. This is what sets life in motion. A twentieth-century Italian poet thus concluded a poem on education: "one grows only if he is dreamed of" (Danilo Dolci, *C'è chi insegna*, in *Poema umano*, 1974).

I would like to conclude with a question: do these discourses still have meaning? Is Lent still meaningful? Is it current? Does it interest anyone? This is not my question, but Paul VI's. In 1965 he noticed that the people of his time had difficulty understanding Lent, because it seemed completely out of date. And he posed a courageous question to those who listened to him: "What do you think? Is Lent still relevant? i.e. interesting? i.e. important? i.e. useful? i.e. possible?" (Paul VI, General Audience, 3 March 1965). It seems to me an impressive act of freedom to ask oneself this question: to ask oneself whether the things we do, even ancient and sacrosanct things like Lent, still make sense. And I would say that only if Lent really puts us in touch with the radical issues of life, such as freedom and slavery, and only if it rekindles in us the desire for a better life, then it makes sense to live it and to offer it.

Intervention of Professor Emilia Palladino

In presenting this Message for Lent 2024, I will look at some aspects that have struck me most, for my area of

competence and my personal sensibility.

I will start out from a specific passage: *Our Lenten journey will be concrete if ... we realize that even today we remain under the rule of Pharaoh. A rule that makes us weary and indifferent. ... True, Baptism has begun our process of liberation, yet there remains in us an inexplicable longing for slavery. A kind of attraction to the security of familiar things, to the detriment of our freedom.*

We must admit that it is true. It almost seems better to live inside a familiar prison, closed, still, than outside, in the open air, where there are changes to confront (as we well know) and the need for a certain courage to evolve and to work for that development which, *to be authentic ... must foster the development of each man and of the whole man*, as Paul VI said (Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio*, 14).

Instead, Pope Francis warns us of the danger that “an exodus can be interrupted”. That mysterious and salvific passage of all humanity and every individual who forms part of it from enchainment to the promised land can stop. Indeed, we are all *at the threshold of universal fraternity and at levels of scientific, technical, cultural, and juridical development capable of guaranteeing dignity to all, yet we grope about in the darkness of inequality and conflict.*

How many personal and social enslavements are we entirely unaware of? How many do we feel we can do something about, and if so, do we “mobilize” for them - do we come out of immobility?

Today's inequalities are an abomination: it is not just a matter of the gap in economic terms between the haves and have-nots, but also of the denial of human dignity and basic human rights for entire portions of humanity kept in bondage.

Some data:

1. according to the World Health Organization, in 2023 three out of ten people will not have access to essential health services and it is estimated that two billion people will have to starve to meet the costs of medical care and medicines;
2. according to the International Labour Office, as of 2023, there are still 152 million children and adolescents (64 million are girls and 88 million are boys) who are victims of child labour, among whom 40,000 extract coltan in the mines of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and coltan is the fundamental element to build smartphones, tablets, computers ... those tools that not infrequently produce a form of addiction in those who use them;
3. according to a UN report, in 2021, 28 million people will be forced into forced labour and 22 million into forced marriage; not to mention the human trafficking we hear about almost daily.

The *deficit of hope* acts its power here: in the depressed justification that we cannot empty the sea with a spoon, we do not even act on what seems possible to us. And yet, we could change what little we are given: a lifestyle more respectful of self, others and the environment; re-learning solidarity and fraternity, first and foremost in our own homes; collaborating to build healthy working environments, promoters of the common good and not slaves to profit at all costs - as the system would have us all obey, like idolators of a supreme Pharaoh.

This Lent, then, can also be a “social conversion” if, in seeing reality as it is, we can *act by stopping* and changing what little we can, regaining breath and hope. We can choose, as the Pope says, *to embrace the risk of thinking that we are not in agony, but in childbirth.*

As a woman who has given birth, I can say that I experienced a very real moment when I believed that death would win over my life and that of my daughter, who was about to be born. I do not know if all women who give birth go through this terrible moment, in which death and life merge, agony and birth fight over who should prevail. Regardless of the medical and neonatological aspect, the passage through this instant becomes

transformative, precisely when one *embraces the risk of thinking that life is victorious anyway*, “before” labour ends.

In the midst of the abominations of slavery in these times and places, we can decide - this Lent - to have the courage, mixed with fear (it is a risk indeed!), to think that life is indeed victorious, “before” the labour ends. We can then welcome the suggestions for change contained in this Message and thus allow hope, even if small, to start walking again, taking faith and charity with it, out in the open, where there are spaces to promote life and act out human fraternity.

Intervention of Mauro Pallotta (“Maupal”)

I thank His Eminence for the invitation.

I believe that there are few words to describe the pride and honour of being able to represent, through my art form, the words that Pope Francis has given the world for the Lenten path we are about to take.

Every word of his text has a specific exception and multi-valued weight; therefore, my task has required total commitment. I have tried to synthesize the profound concepts expressed by the Holy Father through a pictorial language in a simple, easy to read style, in the hope of never debasing them or making them superficial or trivial.

Representing Christian values through art has always been one of the major tasks of painting and sculpture. Moreover, it must also be emphasized that painting, sculpture and other art forms have elevated their quality and acquired enormous social and political importance precisely because of their representations of Christian themes.

Translating the words of Pope Francis into works and conveying the values expressed in the Message through my art, is for me a preferential way of reaching far, breaking down barriers and somehow accompanying people to cross the desert to reach the desired goal of freedom.

This challenge is already alive in my artistic and personal life. In the last two years, in fact, I have been involved in some projects within prisons. Working with prisoners gives an unexpected richness; you often meet people who have lived through hell and now know better than anyone what the way to paradise is. I have met people who have crossed the desert and, paradoxically, have achieved freedom, the inner freedom, the freedom that God gives. Others are still on their way, they are going through the desert but, although the horizon gives no sign of respite, they keep walking, certain that relief will come. To be there with them and to give them, through art, a tool to move forward more swiftly and help them cross the boundaries of their own frailties and past is a responsibility, but also an experience that allows me, too, to taste the flavour of freedom in the daily deserts.

With the artwork for this Lent, I would like to be able to join the Holy Father in a simple but effective way, as he guides us in a profound reflection with his words, and leads us on a path that aims to lead us to abandon our slavery, until we reach the promised land.

In this first illustration, I have depicted the desert using the image of Pope Francis as he pushes a wheelbarrow containing a “sack” of faith. It is a desert of nails, which represent all our idols, old and new, all our imprisonments. These sharp obstacles might pierce the wheelbarrow’s rubber wheel but, by following Pope Francis, who opens the path with the power of faith, they disappear: the road becomes passable for all and the goal attainable.

For the entire Lenten period, I will make myself available to the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, which once a week will publish a new drawing accompanying a passage from the Holy Father’s Lenten Message.
