



# The Holy See

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## **MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS FOR THE 2023 WORLD DAY OF THE POOR**

*19 November 2023, Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time*

**“Do not turn your face away from anyone who is poor” (Tob 4:7)**

1. This, the seventh annual World Day of the Poor, is a fruitful sign of the Father’s mercy and a support for the lives of our communities. As its celebration becomes more and more rooted in the pastoral life of the Church, it enables us to discover ever anew the heart of the Gospel. Our daily efforts to welcome the poor are still not enough. A great river of poverty is traversing our cities and swelling to the point of overflowing; it seems to overwhelm us, so great are the needs of our brothers and sisters who plead for our help, support and solidarity. For this reason, on the Sunday before the Solemnity of Jesus Christ King of the Universe, we gather around his Table to receive from him once more the gift and strength to live lives of poverty and to serve the poor.

“Do not turn your face away from anyone who is poor” (Tob 4:7). These words help us to understand the essence of our witness. By reflecting on the Book of Tobit, a little-known text of the Old Testament, yet one that is charming and full of wisdom, we can better appreciate the message the sacred writer wished to communicate. We find ourselves before a scene of family life: a father, Tobit, embraces his son, Tobias, who is about to set out on a lengthy journey. The elderly Tobit fears that he will never again see his son, and so leaves him his “spiritual testament”. Tobit had been deported to Nineveh and is now blind, and thus doubly poor. At the same time, he remains always certain of one thing, expressed by his very name: “The Lord has been my good”. As a God-fearing man and a good father, he wants to leave his son not simply material riches, but the witness of the right path to follow in life. So he tells him: “Revere the Lord all your days, my son, and refuse to sin or to transgress his commandments. Live uprightly all the days of your life, and do not walk in the ways of wrongdoing” (4:5).

2. We see immediately that what the elderly Tobit asks of his son is not simply to think of God and to call upon him in prayer. He speaks of making concrete gestures, carrying out good works and

practising justice. He goes on to state this even more clearly: “To all those who practice righteousness give alms from your possessions, and do not let your eye begrudge the gift when you make it” (4:7).

The words of this wise old man make us think. We are reminded that Tobit had lost his sight after having performed a work of mercy. As he himself tells us, from youth he had devoted his life to works of charity: “I performed many acts of charity for my kindred and my people who had gone with me in exile to Nineveh in the land of the Assyrians... I would give my food to the hungry and my clothing to the naked; and if I saw the dead body of any of my people thrown out behind the wall of Nineveh, I would bury it” (1:3.17).

For this act of charity, the king had deprived him of all his goods and reduced him to utter poverty. Still, the Lord had need of Tobit; once he regained his post as an official, he courageously continued to do as he had done. Let us hear his tale, which can also speak to us today. “At our festival of Pentecost, which is the sacred festival of weeks, a good dinner was prepared for me and I reclined to it. When the table was set for me and an abundance of food was placed before me, I said to my son Tobias, ‘Go, my child, and bring whatever poor person you may find of our people among the exiles of Nineveh, who is wholeheartedly mindful of God, and he shall eat together with me. I will wait for you, until you come back’” (2:1-2). How meaningful it would be if, on the Day of the Poor, this concern of Tobit were also our own! If we were to invite someone to share our Sunday dinner, after sharing in the Eucharistic table, the Eucharist we celebrate would truly become a mark of communion. If it is true that around the altar of the Lord we are conscious that we are all brothers and sisters, how much more visible would our fraternity be, if we shared our festive meal with those who are in need!

Tobias did as his father told him, but he returned with the news that a poor man had been murdered and thrown into the market place. Without hesitating, the elderly Tobit got up from the table and went to bury that man. Returning home exhausted, he fell asleep in the courtyard; some bird droppings fell on his eyes and he became blind (cf. 2:1-10). An irony of fate: no good deed goes unpunished! That is what we are tempted to think, but faith teaches us to go more deeply. The blindness of Tobit was to become his strength, enabling him to recognize even more clearly the many forms of poverty all around him. In due time, the Lord would give him back his sight and the joy of once more seeing his son Tobias. When that day came, we are told, “Tobit saw his son and threw his arms around him, and he wept and said to him, ‘I see you, my son, the light of my eyes!’ Then he said, ‘Blessed be God, and blessed be his great name, and blessed be all his holy angels. May his holy name be blessed throughout all the ages. Though he afflicted me, he has had mercy upon me. Now I see my son Tobias’” (11:13-14).

3. We may well ask where Tobit found the courage and the inner strength that enabled him to serve God in the midst of a pagan people and to love his neighbour so greatly that he risked his own life. That of Tobit is a remarkable story: a faithful husband and a caring father, he was

deported far from his native land, where he suffered unjustly, persecuted by the king and mistreated by his neighbours. Despite being such a good man, he was put to the test. As sacred Scripture often teaches us, God does not spare trials to those who are righteous. Why? It is not to disgrace us, but to strengthen our faith in him.

Tobit, in his time of trial, discovers his own poverty, which enables him to recognize others who are poor. He is faithful to God's law and keeps the commandments, but for him this is not enough. He can show practical concern for the poor because he has personally known what it is to be poor. His advice to Tobias thus becomes his true testament: "Do not turn your face away from anyone who is poor" (4:7). In a word, whenever we encounter a poor person, we cannot look away, for that would prevent us from encountering the face of the Lord Jesus. Let us carefully consider his words: "from *anyone* who is poor". Everyone is our neighbour. Regardless of the colour of their skin, their social standing, the place from which they came, if I myself am poor, I can recognize my brothers or sisters in need of my help. We are called to acknowledge every poor person and every form of poverty, abandoning the indifference and the banal excuses we make to protect our illusory well-being.

4. We are living in times that are not particularly sensitive to the needs of the poor. The pressure to adopt an affluent lifestyle increases, while the voices of those dwelling in poverty tend to go unheard. We are inclined to neglect anything that varies from the model of life set before the younger generation, those who are most vulnerable to the cultural changes now taking place. We disregard anything that is unpleasant or causes suffering, and exalt physical qualities as if they were the primary goal in life. Virtual reality is overtaking real life, and increasingly the two worlds blend into one. The poor become a film clip that can affect us for a moment, yet when we encounter them in flesh and blood on our streets, we are annoyed and look the other way. Haste, by now the daily companion of our lives, prevents us from stopping to help care for others. The parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. *Lk 10:25-37*) is not simply a story from the past; it continues to challenge each of us in the here and now of our daily lives. It is easy to delegate charity to others, yet the calling of every Christian is to become personally involved.

5. Let us thank the Lord that so many men and women are devoted to caring for the poor and the excluded; they are persons of every age and social status who show understanding and readiness to assist the marginalized and those who suffer. They are not superheroes but "next door neighbours", ordinary people who quietly make themselves poor among the poor. They do more than give alms: they listen, they engage, they try to understand and deal with difficult situations and their causes. They consider not only material but also spiritual needs; and they work for the integral promotion of individuals. The Kingdom of God becomes present and visible in their generous and selfless service; like the seed that falls on good soil, it takes root in their lives and bears rich fruit (cf. *Lk 8:4-15*). Our gratitude to these many volunteers needs to find expression in prayer that their testimony will increasingly prove fruitful.

6. On this, the sixtieth anniversary of the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, we do well to take to heart the following words of Pope Saint John XXIII: “Every human being enjoys the right to life, to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for the proper development of life, including food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest, and, finally, the necessary social services. In consequence, every individual has the right to be looked after in the event of ill health; disability stemming from work; widowhood and forced unemployment; as well as in other cases when, through no fault of his own, he or she is deprived of the means of livelihood” (ed. Carlen, No. 11).

How much still needs to be done for this to become a reality, not least through a serious and effective commitment on the part of political leaders and legislators! For all the limitations and at times the failures of politics in discerning and serving the common good, may the spirit of solidarity and subsidiarity continue to grow among citizens who believe in the value of voluntary commitment to serving the poor. Certainly there is a need to urge and even pressure public institutions to perform their duties properly, yet it is of no use to wait passively to receive everything “from on high”. Those living in poverty must also be involved and accompanied in a process of change and responsibility.

7. In addition, we must once more acknowledge new forms of poverty, as well as those described earlier. I think in particular of peoples caught up in situations of war, and especially children deprived of the serene present and a dignified future. We should never grow accustomed to such situations. Let us persevere in every effort to foster peace as a gift of the risen Lord and the fruit of a commitment to justice and dialogue.

Nor can we ignore those forms of speculation in various sectors, which have led to dramatic price increases that further impoverish many families. Earnings are quickly spent, forcing sacrifices that compromise the dignity of every person. If a family has to choose between food for nourishment and medical care, then we need to pay attention to the voices of those who uphold the right to both goods in the name of the dignity of the human person.

Then too how can we fail to note the ethical confusion present in the world of labour? The inhumane treatment meted out to many male and female laborers; inadequate pay for work done; the scourge of job insecurity; the excessive number of accident-related deaths, often the result of a mentality that chooses quick profit over a secure workplace... We are reminded of the insistence of Saint John Paul II that “the primary basis of the value of work is man himself... However true it may be that man is destined for work and called to it, in the first place, work is ‘for man’ and not man ‘for work’” (*Laborem Exercens*, 6).

8. This list, deeply troubling in itself, only partially accounts for the situations of poverty that are now part of our daily lives. I cannot fail to mention in particular an increasingly evident form of poverty that affects young people. How much frustration and how many suicides are being caused by the illusions created by a culture that leads young people to think that they are “losers”, “good

for nothing”. Let us help them react to these malign influences and find ways to help them grow into self-assured and generous men and women.

When speaking of the poor, it is easy to fall into rhetorical excess. It is also an insidious temptation to remain at the level of statistics and numbers. The poor are persons; they have faces, stories, hearts and souls. They are our brothers and sisters, with good points and bad, like all of us, and it is important to enter into a personal relation with each of them.

The Book of Tobit teaches us to be realistic and practical in whatever we do with and for the poor. This is a matter of justice; it requires us to seek out and find one another, in order to foster the harmony needed for the community to feel itself as such. Caring for the poor is more than simply a matter of a hasty hand-out; it calls for reestablishing the just interpersonal relationships that poverty harms. In this way, “not turning our face away from anyone who is poor” leads us to enjoy the benefits of mercy and charity that give meaning and value to our entire Christian life.

9. May our concern for the poor always be marked by Gospel realism. Our sharing should meet the concrete needs of the other, rather than being just a means of ridding ourselves of superfluous goods. Here too, Spirit-led discernment is demanded, in order to recognize the genuine needs of our brothers and sisters and not our own personal hopes and aspirations. What the poor need is certainly our humanity, our hearts open to love. Let us never forget that “we are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 198). Faith teaches us that every poor person is a son or daughter of God and that Christ is present in them. “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (*Mt 25:40*).

10. This year marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus. In a page of her autobiography, *Story of a Soul*, she tells us: “I have come to realize that perfect charity means putting up with other people’s faults, not being at all taken aback by their faults, being edified by the smallest acts of virtue that we see practised. But above all, I have come to realize that charity must not remain locked in the depths of one’s heart: ‘No one’, Jesus says, ‘lights a candle to put it under a bushel basket, but puts it on a candle-stand, so that it can give light to *everyone* in the house’. For me, that candle represents the charity that must give light and bring joy not only to those dearest to me, but to *everyone* in the house, with the exception of none” (Ms C, 12r°).

In this house of ours, which is the world, everyone has a right to experience the light of charity; no one must be deprived of that light. May the steadfast love of Saint Therese stir our hearts on this World Day of the Poor, and help us not to “turn our face away from anyone who is poor”, but to keep it always focused on the human and divine face of Jesus Christ our Lord.

*Rome, Saint John Lateran, 13 June 2023*

*Memorial of St. Anthony of Padua, Patron of the Poor.*

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