



Message from
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Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development

In occasion of World Fisheries Day
November 21, 2023

“CAST THE NET” (John 21:6)

Dear brothers and sisters,

Human work is a sign of the immense trust with which God instils dignity into our lives. God entrusts his creation to our care and responsibility. With the Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum*, the Holy Father sought to arouse our consciences on the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, eight years after the publication of the Encyclical *Laudato Si'*. The titles of the two documents express the sense of wonder and praise that our souls experience when we live in a just relationship with other creatures and the Creator.

Many times, unfortunately, this has not been so. Instead, a cry of pain rises up to heaven from the earth, from the sea, and from all of creation that groans and suffers. Pope Francis is convinced “that our responses have not been adequate, while the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point” (*LD*, 2). World Fisheries Day is a fitting occasion to heed his call.

Fishing communities in many parts of the world are suffering. Economic problems and unfair competition threaten the survival of fishing, especially family-scale fishery. The next generation often does not take over, and the fishery suffers due to the climate crisis that has made the marine environment more fragile and precarious. With *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis has helped us to think in terms of the paradigm of integral ecology. We are called to safeguard both the environment and jobs, both the sea and fishing communities. Every time that we think of these worlds as separate and disconnected, we undermine the equilibrium that preserves human life on our planet. We are living through a period of epochal change: in just a few decades we have moved from being mindful about labour issues, to the present risk being a culture that ignores people and forgets that fishers are also the stewards of the sea.

Ecological sensitivity is important for protecting the quality of the fish that are harvested and for caring for the seas and the oceans. Fishing that destroys the marine ecosystem frustrates the work of fishers, who know very well how important the care of the sea is for the future of their livelihood. In recent months, many factors are putting small-scale fishing at risk, while favouring those who exploit labour and act unjustly, sometimes marketing fish that were caught in unhealthy environments and by underpaid workers. As Pope Francis reminds us:

“the depletion of fishing reserves especially hurts small fishing communities without the means to replace those resources” (*LS*, 48). Fishing was the occupation of the first disciples of Jesus. The evangelist John tells of the miraculous catch of fish as an experience of encounter with the Risen Jesus (John 21:1-14). The Lord finds the disciples saddened by his death on the cross. They had already returned to their fishing on the Lake of Galilee. After a night of failure, the Risen Christ reveals his power to them: “Cast the net to the right side of the boat and you will find some.” Peter and the others trust him, and their catch surpasses all expectations: one hundred fifty-three large fish. Even so, the net does not break. In this way, the disciples learn to hope. Today all of us still need fishers: they demonstrate faith every time they cast their nets into the water. Fishing, in fact, does not depend on human ability alone, but also upon the conditions of the sea and on the providence of God. The work of fishing is a constantly renewed act of trust: it helps us to grasp the value of faith.

World Fisheries Day encourages us to pray for fishers and for their families. We thank them for their valuable work: they are stewards of a delicate equilibrium and even pioneers of integral ecology. Theirs is a strenuous, wearisome activity that is often not fully recognized by society. We are grateful for the care with which many of them clean up plastics and other materials that pollute the sea, as Pope Francis has recalled on numerous occasions. Moreover, fishing feeds many populations of the world. This is why the daily gesture of casting nets, coupled with deep respect for the generosity of creation, is so meaningful. We must counter the arrogance of the powerful who threaten the livelihood of honest workers and endanger marine biodiversity: “We need to rethink among other things the question of human power, its meaning and its limits. For our power has frenetically increased in a few decades. We have made impressive and awesome technological advances, and we have not realized that at the same time we have turned into highly dangerous beings, capable of threatening the lives of many beings and our own survival” (*LD*, 28).

Dear fishers, your simple faith enriches the Church that is living in a time of Synod. You are building the Church, uniting faith and work every day. Beautiful scenes of interreligious dialogue and of coexistence between diverse peoples abound on your vessels. From the first centuries of the Christian faith, the ship has been the image used most frequently to describe the Church, a community on a journey on the sea of history through storms, swells and calms. May these words of Pope Francis encourage you as we all remember that: “Human life, intelligence and freedom are elements of the nature that enriches our planet, part of its internal workings and its equilibrium” (*LD*, 26). With intelligence and freedom, please join the Church in taking care of humanity. As guardians of the sea and honest workers, help the Church to cast its nets tirelessly, thereby transforming humanity into a family of brothers and sisters, and transforming earth, sea and sky into a new creation.



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Prefect