

MESSAGE FOR THE 2020 WORLD TOURISM DAY
DICASTERY FOR PROMOTING INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
27 SEPTEMBER 2020

TOURISM AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

The 41st World Tourism Day takes place this year in the situation of uncertainty dictated by developments in the Covid-19 pandemic, whose end is not yet in sight. The pandemic has resulted in a drastic reduction in human mobility and tourism, both international and national, to an all-time low. The suspension of international flights, the closing of airports and borders, the adoption of strict restrictions on travel, including domestic travel, is causing an unprecedented crisis in many sectors related to the tourism industry. It is feared that, in the worst-case scenario, at the end of 2020, the drop in tourists, now standing at 850 million, will increase to 1.2 billion international tourists, with a global economic loss of about 1.2 trillion dollars. This will mean a loss of about 100 million jobs overall in the tourism sector. According to the Secretary General of the World Tourism Organization (WTO), Zurab Pololikashvili: “Tourism has been the hardest hit of all the major sectors as countries lock down... Tourism is a lifeline to millions, especially in the developing world. Opening the world up to tourism again will save jobs, protect livelihoods and enable our sector to resume its vital role in driving sustainable development”.¹

This worrying scenario, unthinkable even a few months ago, must not paralyse us and deprive us of a positive vision of the future. As Pope Francis has observed: “Even worse than this crisis is the tragedy of squandering it... At this moment, in the great effort of beginning anew, how damaging is pessimism, the tendency to see everything in the worst light and to keep saying that nothing will return as before!”²

Tourism and rural development – the theme chosen by the WTO for this World Day even before the Covid-19 emergency – providentially indicates one path towards a possible recovery of the tourism sector. It starts from taking seriously and putting into practice sustainable development in the field of tourism. This means greater interest in extra-urban tourist destinations, small villages, hamlets, roads and places less known and less frequented. These out-of-the-way places should be discovered or rediscovered, because they are enchanting and unspoilt. Country life thrives in these places, far from the crowded streets of mass tourism. What we need to promote is a sustainable and responsible tourism, carried out in respect for the principles of social and economic justice, and in full respect for the environment and cultures. This kind of tourism will acknowledge the centrality of the local host community and its right to be a protagonist in the sustainable and socially responsible tourism development of its territory. It will thus be a tourism that favours the positive interaction between the tourism industry, the local community and travellers.³

This type of tourism can become a driving force to assist rural economies dependent on agriculture and often marked by small family farms in marginal areas that are perceived as low income by the food industry. Tourism and rural agriculture can thus become two essential components of a new world that we hope to build. A tourism centred on people. Small farmers, after all, are the first stewards of creation, thanks to their patient and hard work on the land. Tourists are visitors who can help to sustain an ecosystem, provided they travel in a thoughtful and sober way. Travelling to rural destinations can thus involve, concretely, supporting local enterprises and small farms whose activity is in harmony with the laws of nature. A visit to such places can give a taste of history and open hearts to the wider horizon of fraternity and solidarity.

¹ <https://www.unwto.org/news/covid-19-world-tourism-remains-at-a-standstill-as-100-of-countries-impose-restrictions-on-travel>

² *Homily for the Solemnity of Pentecost*, 31 May 2020.

³ See the definition adopted by the Italian Association of Responsible Tourism, 9 October 2005.

A tourism capable of respecting and sharing the gifts of the land in rural areas also becomes a concrete way to learn new lifestyles. The wisdom of those who cultivate the land, rooted in observation and patient expectation, can certainly help our hectic modern world to harmonize the daily rhythm of life with the rhythms of nature. Combining tourism and rural development is a good way to learn new cultures and to appropriate a sense of stewardship for creation. Today these are a moral duty, but they also serve as an urgent summons to collective action.

“Rural tourism” thus becomes a place where we can learn a new way of relating to one another and to nature. Every personal change has to begin with a genuine change in behaviour. This means setting out on a journey, and setting out on a journey requires a goal. The out-of-the-way places of the countryside can make this journey possible. Tourism combines with development if it takes place in a slow, gentle and sustainable way, i.e. paying attention to rural farming practices, to the quiet rhythms of life in marginal areas, appreciating the untouched natural beauty of entire inland areas, experiencing amazement at the thousand little things to be seen, choosing local agricultural products. In this way, we come to appreciate the differences, small or large, between the traditions, places and communities we encounter. So why should we not encourage a tourism that makes us appreciate rural and marginal areas by encountering them on foot? This will allow us to slow down and avoid the risk of frantically rushing from one thing to another.⁴

Especially during this time, tourism can become a means of encouraging that closeness our postmodern world so greatly needs: closeness in relationships and thus closeness of hearts. Tourism, while still involving the movement of people and goods, must now show its transformative dimension as a recreational activity that encourages a spirit of fraternity among peoples.

Tourism is suffering the most immediate and direct effects of this time of uncertainty in mass travel. We believe that steps must be taken to support the income of tourism workers and the world of agriculture, with particular concern and care for the most vulnerable communities in each region. In this way, the tourism sector will be able to resume its course, albeit at lower levels of circulation. Yet the circulation of people, goods and currency will be the tangible sign of a proximity that has begun in the heart. A responsible and sustainable tourism, one that makes the most of local resources and activities, is to be encouraged as a critical resource in the fight against poverty, which has increased exponentially as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In conclusion, we want to express our closeness and support to all those working to alleviate the impact of the pandemic on the lives of individuals and societies dependent on tourism.

We appeal to government leaders and those responsible for national economic policies to promote and encourage a responsible tourism, implemented in accordance with principles of social and economic justice and fully respectful of the environment and cultures. May they show especial concern for marginal areas, providing them with concrete opportunities for development, enhancing their particular gifts, allowing local communities to share in decision-making processes, and improving the income of those who work the land.

In a particular way, we ask ecological movements and all those committed to the protection of the environment to contribute by their efforts to the conversion of hearts for the sake of a healthy and correct integral ecology that combines the dignity of the human person with the protection of conditions in rural communities in marginal areas. Economic planning should work to protect the poor and the most vulnerable actors in the economic cycle. Agricultural workers in rural areas should be considered direct recipients of significant economic-financial aid and of projects for the recovery and encouragement of rural family farming.

We ask Bishops and all those responsible for the pastoral care of the tourism sector to make a concerted effort, each in his or her own territory, to undertake concrete initiatives to help tourist activities. May the faithful and parishes respond with solicitude and generosity to the needs of those tourism workers presently in difficulty, and develop networks of closeness and support for those who have lost their income. May we all set out on new trails that enable tourists to enjoy

⁴ Cf. FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* (24 May 2015), 18.

rural areas, while combining respect for the environment and ways of supporting local tourism personnel.

Finally, we would express our deep gratitude to all who have shown solidarity and support to those dependent on tourism, particularly in rural areas. With God's help, may we all set out together on the journey towards a better future.

Peter K. A. Cardinal TURKSON

Prefect

From the Vatican, August 6, 2020, on the Feast of the Transfiguration