

Vatican City, 27 March 2019

Message
of H.E. Cardinal Peter K. A. Turkson
Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development
to the Participants in the Annual Meeting
of the *Comité Catholique International pour les Tsiganes* (CCIT)

(Trogir, Croatia, 5 - 7 April 2019)

Dear Reverend Fr. Dumas,
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I am pleased to address my cordial greetings to all of you gathered here for the Annual Meeting of the International Catholic Committee for Gypsies, keeping in mind the interesting and valuable exchange I had with many of you last year in Banneux, Belgium.

The chosen theme, *The Mission of Return: A Source for Change*, gives a clear direction for the deliberations in this meeting.

The Mission of Return forces us to turn our eyes to the past, imposing a re-interpretation of history and a return to your roots, with gratitude and a newfound zeal, to re-discover what lies at the base and centre of your mission, and to find the strength and vitality of your beginnings, on which you can build a better and renewed future. All this in the full knowledge that the work we are constructing today remains for future generations and, therefore, must have a solid foundation and be rich in its content, constituting a real resource that we can pass on to young people.

The mission of return requires us to look for all that we have in common to enable us to know one another better, to understand one another better, to overcome prejudices and preconceptions, in order to build unity in diversity. This is born out of every encounter, in the first place through acceptance of the other and of their reality in its entirety as well as their customs, welcoming unconditionally, in dialogue, in being open to their otherness and their hierarchy of values, in recognising their identity and allowing them to remain fully themselves.

I know that this mission and your whole service towards the Roma and other itinerant groups is not easy. Therefore, I wish to assure you that the Church is near, and to thank you, as I express the gratitude of the Holy Father, as well as that of my Dicastery.

Despite the joint efforts of the various Church and social institutions to promote the integration of Roma people into society and ensure their full participation in exercising their

rights and their duties, much remains to be done. In various countries, the Roma continue to live on the existential peripheries, marginalised, forgotten and lacking basic means. I think of those who live in segregation in so-called “nomad camps” and on the outskirts of cities, under bridges and on the side of the street, often misled or betrayed by fellow Roma. I think of the mothers begging with small children in their arms, of the girls and boys who leave school, and are often forced to do so. I think of the fathers who would like to ensure the wellbeing of their families, but no one offers them a job because they are different. Finally, I think of the many men, women and children who are victims of human trafficking or other forms of slavery. Regarding this, Pope Francis reminds all of us that we “*are called to develop more and more collaboration, to overcome all kinds of inequality, all kinds of discrimination, which are precisely what makes it possible for a man to make another man a slave. A common commitment to facing this challenge will be a valuable aid for the construction of a renewed society oriented towards freedom, justice and peace.*”¹

Dear Friends, you reach out to the Roma in many places, but especially on the peripheries, where many do not dare or do not want to go for fear of humiliation and rejection; you draw near to them in places where it becomes necessary to forget oneself, in order to give oneself freely according to the logic of the Gospel. Acting in this manner, you bring them hope and a reason to become the protagonists of their own integral human development, of their growth in faith, and spiritual and ethical understanding. While you move close to them and enter into a dialogue with them, you realise that you are entering a different way of being and doing, where your gestures and behaviours, as well as your words and actions, must take on a new understanding and a new meaning. At this point, I wish to remember the words of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI regarding development, in the Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*. I quote: “*Development needs Christians with their arms raised towards God in prayer, Christians moved by the knowledge that truth-filled love, caritas in veritate, from which authentic development proceeds, is not produced by us, but given to us. For this reason, even in the most difficult and complex times, besides recognizing what is happening, we must above all else turn to God's love. Development requires attention to the spiritual life, a serious consideration of the experiences of trust in God, spiritual fellowship in Christ, reliance upon God's providence and mercy, love and forgiveness, self-denial, acceptance of others, justice and peace.*” (CV 79).

In your theme, I also take note of the words, “*Source for change*”. Let us then look at the present with future prospects in mind, with hope and optimism, asking ourselves what needs to change, and why. What is the aim of the mission of return?

The presentation of the history and spirituality of CCIT,² which I have followed in Banneux, allows me to make some observations about this. The path of the Committee in its 44 years of life has been arduous and tiring, especially in the beginning. However, today there are a good number of members, among priests and the religious as well as among lay

¹ HOLY FATHER FRANCIS, *Video Message to the participants in the international forum on modern slavery* (Argentina), 07.05.2018: <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/05/07/180507b.html>.

² Cf. ELISA E LÉON TAMBOUR, *Pour resituer le CCIT : son histoire, sa spiritualité*, Banneux, Belgium, 8 April 2018.

people and the Roma themselves. Throughout the years, especially since 1979, the Committee has continued to develop, with enthusiasm and hardship, characteristics that are still the bedrock of its progress. Today, it wants to be a space characterised by giving, freedom and brotherhood; an intimate bond between the ever-changing situation of Roma people and the Christian meaning of your efforts. Your work is without a doubt important and vital, taking into account its origin and traditions. Thinking back to the history of the CCIT, we cannot fail to remember Fr. André Barthélémy, who, with his constant commitment and firm willingness to transmit faith in Jesus Christ to the Roma people, has been one of the founders of this enterprise. May his great love and concern for the Roma be a guide in reflecting upon your future and forthcoming changes.

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis spoke of “A Church which goes forth”, a missionary Church that does not fear meeting the other, discovering differences, talking about the joy of the Gospel; not in order to proselytise, but in order to share the Good News with everyone, with courage and fervour (cf. 20-24). The Pope developed this concept further in the Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, at n. 129-139, reminding us that everything must start from God, who “*impels us constantly to set out anew, to pass beyond what is familiar, to the fringes and beyond. He takes us to where humanity is most wounded, where men and women, beneath the appearance of a shallow conformity, continue to seek an answer to the question of life’s meaning. [...] Jesus is already there, in the hearts of our brothers and sisters, in their wounded flesh, in their troubles and in their profound desolation. He is already there.*” (GE 135). Pope Francis insists on the importance of collaboration between evangelisation efforts and the social and charity sectors.

This is the perspective in which we should, perhaps, reconsider the role of the CCIT within the Church. From the beginning, as Mr. Tambour mentioned, the Committee has worked with a missionary spirit towards the Roma and has created an environment and a mentality closely linking the daily life of the Roma with the spiritual dimension. However, their work could have been even richer and deeper had they been more open towards collaboration with the local Churches, with their Priests, who have sent you on this mission, and with the parishes.

Roma people need this relationship too. In the first place, because all of those who are friends with them are called to work in raising awareness within their parish communities, to respond to Pope Francis’ call to *welcome, protect, promote and integrate*³ not only migrants, but also Roma people. Secondly, cooperation with other Church institutions helps us to take advantage of all the resources, both spiritual and material, which the Church makes available to promote the integral development of the poor and to more easily tackle the structural causes of poverty (cf. EG 188), therefore benefitting the Roma population. The CCIT will be an authentic gift for the Church and for Roma people if it is able to fulfil its mission in

³ HOLY FATHER FRANCIS, *Message for the 104th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2018*, [14 January 2018]: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20170815_world-migrants-day-2018.html.

openness and synergy with other institutions. Even Jesus did not bear the weight of the cross alone, but let himself be helped by Simon of Cyrene (cf. Luke 23: 26).

Dear Friends, I hope the Holy Spirit accompanies you with His light and His gifts during this meeting, allowing you to discover all that may bring change and creating for you new ways of serving others. May the Lord bless you and may Mary our Queen accompany you in your journey. I entrust to Her each one of you, your communities and your families.

Peter K.A. Cardinal Turkson
Prefect