Vatican
Francis, the comic strip
Pope Francis leads an audience with a delegation from the Agenzia delle Entrate, Italy's gove

Pope Francis leads an audience with a delegation from the Agenzia delle Entrate, Italy's governmental tax agency, at the Vatican Jan. 31, 2022. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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VATICAN CITY — When done right, the collection of taxes can promote a culture that protects the well-being of all, especially the poor and least fortunate, Pope Francis said.

Although some may see tax agencies as an entity that "puts its hands in their pockets," tax collection really is a "sign of legality and justice," the pope said Jan. 31 during a meeting with a delegation from Italy's revenue agency.

Taxation "must favor the redistribution of wealth, protecting the dignity of the poor and the least, who always risk being crushed by the powerful. Taxation, when it is just, is a function of the common good," he said.

In the Bible and in especially the Gospels, he said, there are no shortage of references to tax collectors, such as Zacchaeus and St. Matthew, and their often tense relationship with the public.

Nevertheless, "the Bible does not demonize money, but invites us to make the right use of it, not to be enslaved by it, not to idolize it."

The custom of tithing was also prominent in the Old Testament and was a sign of two fundamental truths: "that of not being self-sufficient, because salvation comes from God," and "that of being responsible for each other, starting with those most in need."

Pope Francis reminded the members of the Italian revenue agency that in today's world, their work must be guided by "the principles of legality, impartiality and transparency."

While a certain "culture of suspicion" continues today as it did in biblical times, he said, tax collectors must continue to persevere in guaranteeing that the laws enforced by them continue "to maintain a principle of fairness," especially in situations where the interests of one group can generate inequality.

"Legality in the field of taxation is a way to balance social relationships" and diminish corruption, injustice and inequality, he said.

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Pope Francis urged them to ensure that the taxes collected go to essential services, especially health care.

"Please continue with the free health care system, please!" he said. "Defend it so that we do not fall into a paid health care system, where the poor have no right to anything."

He also encouraged them to be impartial in their work, especially when it comes to cases of tax evasion, to ensure that justice is served for the greater good, especially for the many honest people who pay their dues.

"The impartiality of your work affirms that there are no citizens, who are better than others on the basis of their social belonging, but that everyone has the good faith of

being loyal builders of society," the pope said.

Lastly, Pope Francis said that just like Zacchaeus, who upon converting admits to his sin of defrauding poor people and subsequently makes amends, members of the revenue agency must also ensure transparency in order to not risk "fueling suspicion and discontent."

"Transparency in the management of money, which comes from the sacrifices of many working men and women, reveals the freedom of spirit and molds people to be more motivated to pay taxes, especially if tax collection contributes to overcoming inequality, to making investments so that there is more work, to guaranteeing good health and education for all, to creating infrastructure that facilitates social life and the economy," the pope said.