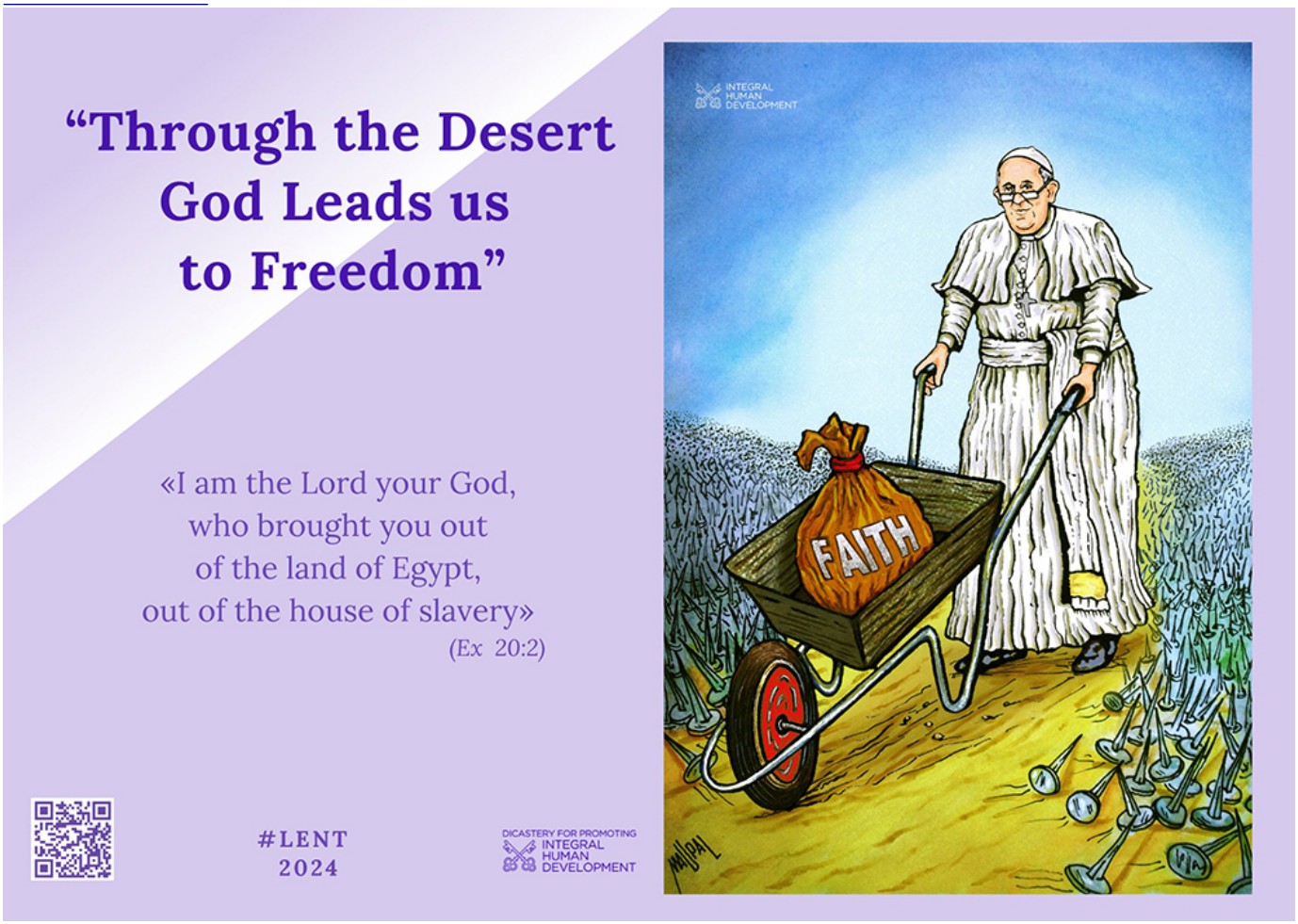
Vatican

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An illustration by Mauro Pallotta, known as "Maupal," for Pope Francis' Lenten message for 2024 was released during a news conference at the Vatican Feb. 1, 2024. Lent begins Feb. 14, Ash Wednesday, and concludes March 28, Holy Thursday. (CNS/Courtesy Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development)

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Lent is a time to free oneself from slavery and take action to free others suffering from the multiple forms of slavery that afflict the world, Pope Francis said.

Even though baptism has begun a process of liberation, "there remains in us an inexplicable longing for slavery. A kind of attraction to the security of familiar things, to the detriment of our freedom," the pope said in his message for Lent, which begins Feb. 14 for Latin-rite Catholics.

Echoing the tragedy of the ancient Israelites, a modern-day Pharaoh "stifles dreams, blocks the view of heaven, makes it appear that this world, in which human dignity is trampled upon and authentic bonds are denied, can never change," the pope wrote.

"We need to combat a deficit of hope that stifles dreams and the silent cry that reaches to heaven and moves the heart of God," he wrote.

Released by the Vatican Feb. 1, the text of the pope's Lenten message focused on God's call to leave behind the bonds of slavery, with the title, "Through the Desert God Leads us to Freedom," which is from the Book of Exodus (20:2).

God enables people to embark on a new journey and experience "a Passover from death to life," the pope wrote.

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"Even today we remain under the rule of Pharaoh. A rule that makes us weary and indifferent. A model of growth that divides and robs us of a future," he said. "Earth, air and water are polluted, but so are our souls."

And, he wrote, there are "the idols that we set up for ourselves," such as a longing to be all-powerful, to be looked up to by all and to dominate others. "We can become

attached to money, to certain projects, ideas or goals, to our position, to a tradition, even to certain individuals," all of which only paralyzes people and creates conflict.

"Lent is a season of conversion, a time of freedom" during which Christians seek to rediscover God's call and promise, he wrote. "It is time to act, and in Lent, to act also means to pause. To pause in prayer, in order to receive the word of God, to pause like the Samaritan in the presence of a wounded brother or sister."

Through prayer, almsgiving and fasting, Christians experience "openness and self-emptying, in which we cast out the idols that weigh us down, the attachments that imprison us," the pope wrote.

Francis invited every Christian community to ask its members to "rethink their lifestyles" and to examine their role in society and the contribution they can make to its betterment.

The synodal church looks for "communitarian decisions" that are "capable of altering the daily lives of individuals and entire neighborhoods, such as the ways we acquire goods, care for creation and strive to include those who go unseen or are looked down upon," he said.

"Let us ask: Do I want a new world? Am I ready to leave behind my compromises with the old?" the pope wrote, inviting the faithful to "keep seeking and be ready to take risks."



Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, speaks during a news conference presenting Pope Francis' Lenten message at the Vatican Feb. 1, 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, presented the Lenten message at a Vatican news conference.

"Traditionally, Lent is a time to review our lives and to individually face the need for personal conversion," he said. However, the pope is challenging the faithful also to seek to change the world.

As believers and as citizens, he said, Christians should ask, "Where are we on the journey with so many siblings at home and worldwide who cry out and ask us to walk with them?"

"By embracing the gift of Lent, every Christian community can accompany its members in facing the challenges of our time," the cardinal said, because "the hoped-for changes in the world begin with change in me and in you."

Emilia Palladino, a professor in the social sciences department of Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University, said "the inequalities present today are an abomination."

There is the gap between "the haves and have-nots" and an outright denial of "human dignity and basic human rights for entire portions of humanity kept in slavery," she said.

In 2023, she said, three out of 10 people did not have access to essential health services and an estimated 2 billion people faced hunger in order to meet expenses related to medical care and medicines, according to the World Health Organization.

As of 2023, she said, there are still 152 million children and adolescents who are victims of child labor, according to the International Labor Office. Some 40,000 of them are working in mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo, extracting coltan, which is needed in making smartphones, tablets and computers, tools that end up being a form of addiction for others.



Emilia Palladino, a professor in the social sciences department of Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University, speaks during a news conference presenting Pope Francis'

Lenten message at the Vatican Feb. 1, 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

In 2021, she added, 28 million people were trapped in forced labor and 22 million into forced marriage in addition to the countless victims of human trafficking, according to a United Nations report.

This is where the lack of hope wields all its power, she said, because the enormity and breadth of these problems act as a depressing justification for inaction.

"But we can change what little we have been given: a lifestyle more respectful of oneself, others and the environment; re-learn solidarity and fraternity, first of all in our own homes; working together to build a healthy work environment, promoters of the common good and not slaves to profit at all costs," she said.

The Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development asked Mauro Pallotta, an Italian street artist, known as "Maupal," to help illustrate the pope's message with a new drawing every week throughout the period of Lent, which concludes March 28, Holy Thursday.

His first illustration, released ahead of Lent, depicts an image of Francis pushing a wheelbarrow containing a sack full of faith through a desert of nails "that represent idols old and new, and our captivity," he said.

Nails in the road would puncture the rubber wheel, putting the journey to a stop, but by "following Pope Francis, who opens the path with the power of faith," the road becomes passable for everyone "and the goal attainable," he said.