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Pope Francis meets refugees at the Moria refugee camp on the island of Lesbos, Greece, in th

Pope Francis meets refugees at the Moria refugee camp on the island of Lesbos, Greece, in this April 16, 2016, file photo. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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The poor bear the image of Jesus, and Christians must offer them support and expressions of Christian charity, Pope Francis said.

"We are called in every circumstance to be friends of the poor, following in the footsteps of Jesus who always began by showing solidarity when dealing with the least among us," the pope wrote in his message for the Nov. 19 celebration of the World Day of the Poor.

"The poor still have much to teach us, because in a culture that has placed wealth at the forefront and often sacrifices the dignity of people on the altar of material goods, they swim against the tide, highlighting that what is essential for life is something else entirely," he wrote.

The papal message was published June 13, the feast of St. Anthony of Padua, patron of the poor.

The theme for the 2024 celebration, "The prayer of the poor rises up to God," is taken from the Book of Sirach; it is an appropriate reflection for a year dedicated to prayer in preparation for the Holy Year 2025, he wrote.

"We need to make the prayer of the poor our own and pray together with them," the pope wrote. "This is a challenge we must embrace and a pastoral activity that needs to be nurtured."

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The World Day of the Poor is an important pastoral opportunity, he wrote, and it "challenges every believer to listen to the prayer of the poor, becoming aware of their presence and needs."

"It is an opportune occasion to implement initiatives that concretely help the poor and to recognize and support the many volunteers who dedicate themselves passionately to those most in need," he wrote.

Prayer and authentic charity go hand in hand, Francis said.

"If prayer does not translate into concrete action, it is in vain" and if faith is not accompanied by works, it is dead, he wrote. "However, charity without prayer risks becoming philanthropy that soon exhausts itself."

Francis noted that St. Teresa of Kolkata often said that "it was from prayer that she drew the strength and faith for her mission of service to the least among us."

God is "an attentive and caring father" who takes care of those who are most in need, he wrote. "No one is excluded from his heart, for in his eyes, we are all poor and needy."

However, people often live as if they were "the masters of life or as if we had to conquer it!" the pope wrote. "Happiness cannot be acquired by trampling on the rights and dignity of others."

"The violence caused by wars clearly shows the arrogance of those who consider themselves to be powerful before men and women, but they are poor in the eyes of God. How many more people are impoverished by misguided policies involving weapons! How many innocent victims! Yet we cannot turn our backs to this reality," he wrote.

"As we journey toward the Holy Year, I urge everyone to become pilgrims of hope, setting tangible goals for a better future," the pope wrote.

"Let us not forget to keep 'the little details of love': stopping, drawing near, giving a little attention, a smile, a caress, a word of comfort," which all require "a daily commitment and are often hidden and silent, but strengthened by prayer."

Francis encouraged all those who are experiencing some form of poverty to not lose hope and to trust in the Lord. "God is attentive to each of you and is close to you."

"God's silence does not mean he is inattentive to our sufferings; rather, it contains a word that must be received with trust, surrendering ourselves to him and to his will," he wrote.

The first section of the Dicastery for Evangelization, the Vatican organizer of the world day, said in a communique that in the week leading up to the celebration Nov. 19, all parish and diocesan communities are called to establish concrete pastoral initiatives that address the needs of the poor in their neighborhoods.

Christians are also invited to pay deeper "spiritual attention to the poor who need God and need someone who is a concrete sign" of God who always listens and is near, the dicastery said.