
Pope Francis: “Birth rates and welcome should never be pit against each other”

The birth rate issue is “a key issue for everyone, especially for the future of Italy and of Europe.” Speaking at the third General States of Birth, **Pope Francis** sent out strong and clear messages to policymakers, notably not to pit birth rates against migrant reception, for “they are two facets of the same coin.” “Childbearing is the primary indicator for measuring the hope of a people”, the Pope remarked: “If few children are born it means that there is little hope. This affects not only the economic and social spheres, as it undermines people's confidence in the future.” The Pope went on to mention the situation in Italy: “I learned that last year Italy hit a record low number of births, with just 393,000 new births. This figure reflects a major concern for the future.” “Having a family is becoming a titanic effort”, is the snapshot given by Francis, for whom “feelings of loneliness, having to rely exclusively on one's personal resources, is dangerous: it means to slowly erode our living together and being resigned to a life of solitude, where each person has to fend for themselves. The consequence is that only the wealthiest can afford greater freedom in terms of choosing what shape they want to give their lives, thanks to their wealth.” “This is unfair, as well as humiliating,” the Pope remarked. Not to mention the situation of women, victims of “a culture that is unfriendly, if not hostile, to the family.” “The most adversely affected,” he explained, “are precisely young women, often forced to choose between a professional career and motherhood, or crushed by the burden of looking after their households, especially if they comprise frail elderly relatives and dependent persons.” “At this time, women are in thrall to this rule of selective labour, which subsequently prevents motherhood,” Francis denounced, referring to the “overwhelming constraints” weighing on women. **“The lack of necessary adjustments leads to unbridled free markets, and to ever more serious situations of inequality”**, was Francis' wake-up call. The Pope referred to an “uncertain future, involving wars, pandemics, mass displacements and climatic crises.” He noted that in this context of uncertainty and fragility, more than others, “the younger generations suffer from a feeling of precariousness, whereby the future appears like a mountain impossible to climb.” “The challenge of finding a stable job, the difficulty of keeping one, prohibitive housing costs, skyrocketing rents and low wages are real problems,” the Pope remarked. “The heroism of many must not become a pretext for everyone,” Francis noted:

“forward-looking policies are needed” for families,

to be pursued “without ideological barriers and biased positions” if we are to overcome the ongoing “demographic winter.” “A change of heart is what is needed: the family is not part of the problem, but part of its solution.” “A happy community naturally develops a desire for procreation and inclusion, while an unhappy society declines into a group of individuals trying to defend what they have at all costs”, explained the Pope. “It is unacceptable for our society to cease being generative and degenerate into sadness,” he cautioned: “We cannot passively accept the fact that many young people struggle to fulfil their family dream, forced to lower the bar of their expectations and settle for personal, mediocre alternatives: making money, pursuing a career, travelling, and jealously safeguarding their time of leisure.” “These are all good and just things when they form part of a generating, life-giving project both within and beyond oneself,” Francis argued: “if, on the other hand, these are nothing more than individual aspirations, they wither into selfishness and result in that inner weariness that numbs a person's great desires and marks our society as a weary society!”

“Let us breathe new life into young people's desires for happiness!

the appeal: “Each one of us knows the indicator of our own happiness. When we are filled with hope-

generating and soul-warming feelings, it comes natural to share them with others. On the contrary, when we are sad, we are defensive, we withdraw and perceive everything as a threat.” For the Pope, "the birth rate challenge is about hope", which "is not an indefinite positive feeling about the future, but rather a concrete virtue involving concrete decisions.” From this perspective, “Nourishing hope is a social, intellectual, artistic, political action in its lofty definition; it means putting one's talents and resources at the service of the common good, it means planting seeds for the future. Hope breeds change and improves the future'.

“Giving renewed impetus to childbearing means repairing those forms of social exclusion that are affecting young people and their future”,

the concluding exhortation: “children are not private goods, they are persons who contribute to the growth of all, conducive to human and generational enrichment.” “Let us not be resigned to dreariness and barren pessimism”, the appeal: “Let us refuse to believe that history is sealed, that nothing can be done to reverse the tide. Indeed, it is precisely in the most arid deserts that God opens up new paths. Let us seek those paths together! Indeed, hope calls us to move forward to find solutions for a society that can rise up to the challenge of our present time, a time of crisis marked by widespread forms of injustice.” “My message to you, who are here to work towards finding good solutions, the fruit of your expertise and professionalism, is: feel that you are called to fulfil the great task of regenerating hope, of setting in motion processes that will breathe new life into Italy, Europe and the world”, was the Pope’s greeting to participants.

M.Michela Nicolais