

CATECHESIS ON
HOPE



POPE FRANCIS

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Console, console my people (Is 40)

General audience of 7 December 2016

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today we shall begin a new series of catecheses, on the theme of *Christian hope*. It is very important, because hope never disappoints. Optimism disappoints, but hope does not! We have such need, in these times which appear dark, in which we sometimes feel disoriented at the evil and violence which surrounds us, at the distress of so many of our brothers and sisters. We need hope! We feel disoriented and even rather discouraged, because we are powerless and it seems this darkness will never end.

We must not let hope abandon us, because God, with his love, walks with us. “I hope, because God is beside me”: we can all say this. Each one of us can say: “I hope, I have hope, because God walks with me”. He walks and he holds my hand. God does not leave us to ourselves. The Lord Jesus has conquered evil and has opened the path of life for us.

Thus, particularly in this Season of Advent, which is the time of waiting, in which we prepare ourselves to welcome once again the comforting mystery of the Incarnation and the light of Christmas, it is important to reflect on hope. Let us allow the Lord to teach us what it means to hope. Therefore let us listen to the words of Sacred Scripture, beginning with *the Prophet Isaiah*, the great Prophet of Advent, the great messenger of hope.

In the second part of his Book, Isaiah addresses the people with his *message of comfort*: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned.... ‘A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken” (40:1-2, 3-5).

God the Father comforts by raising up comforters, whom he asks to encourage the people, his children, by proclaiming that the tribulation has ended, affliction has ended, and sins have been forgiven. This is what heals the afflicted and fearful heart. This is why the Prophet asks them to *prepare the way of the Lord*, to be ready to receive his gifts and his salvation.

For the people, comfort begins with the opportunity to walk on God’s path, a new path, made straight and passable, a way prepared *in the desert*, so as to make it possible to cross it and return to the homeland. The Prophet addresses the people who are living the tragedy of the Exile in Babylon, and now instead they hear that they may return to their land, across a path made smooth and wide, without valleys and mountains that make the journey arduous, a level path across the desert. Thus, preparing that path means preparing *a way of salvation and liberation* from every obstacle and hindrance.

The Exile was a fraught moment in the history of Israel, when the people had lost everything. The people had lost their homeland, freedom, dignity, and even trust in God. They felt abandoned and hopeless. Instead, however, there is the Prophet’s appeal which reopens the heart to faith. *The desert* is a place in which it is difficult to live, but precisely there, one can now walk in order to *return not only to the homeland, but return to God, and return to hoping and smiling*. When we are in darkness, in difficulty, we do not smile, and it is precisely hope which teaches us to smile in order to find the path that leads to God. One of the first things that happens to people who distance themselves from God is that they are people who do not smile. Perhaps they can break into a loud laugh, one after another, a joke, a chuckle ... but their smile is missing! Only hope brings a smile: it is the hopeful smile in the expectation of finding God.

Life is often a desert, it is difficult to walk in life, but if we trust in

God it can become beautiful and wide as a highway. Just never lose hope, just continue to believe, always, in spite of everything. When we are before a child, although we have many problems and many difficulties, a smile comes to us from within, because we see hope in front of us: a child is hope! And in this way we must be able to discern in life the way of hope which leads us to find God, God who became a Child for us. He will make us smile, he will give us everything!

These very words of Isaiah were then used by John the Baptist in his preaching that invites to conversion. This is what he said: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord” (Mt 3:3). It is a voice which cries out where it seems that no one can hear it — for who can listen in the desert? — and which cries out in the disorientation caused by a crisis of faith. We cannot deny that the world today is in a crisis of faith. One says: “I believe in God, I am a Christian” — “I belong to this religion...”. But your life is far from being Christian; it is far removed from God! Religion, faith is but an expression: “Do I believe?” — “Yes!”. This means returning to God, converting the heart to God and going on this path to find him. He is waiting for us. This is John the Baptist’s preaching: prepare. Prepare for the encounter with this Child who will give our smile back to us. When the Baptist proclaims Jesus’ coming, it is as if the Israelites are still in exile, because they are under the Roman dominion, which renders them foreigners in their own homeland, ruled by powerful occupiers that make decisions about their lives. However, the true history is not the one made by the powerful, but the one *made by God together with his little ones*. The true history — that which will remain in eternity — is the one that God writes *with his little ones*: God with Mary, God with Jesus, God with Joseph, *God with the little ones*. Those little and simple people whom we see around the newborn Jesus: Zechariah and Elizabeth, who were old and barren, Mary, the young virgin maiden betrothed to Joseph, the shepherds, who were scorned and counted for nothing. It is the little ones, made great by their faith, *the little ones who are able to continue to hope*. Hope is the virtue of the *little ones*. The great ones, those who are satisfied, do not know hope; they do not know what it is.

It is the little ones with God, with Jesus, who transform the desert of

exile, of desperation and loneliness, of suffering, into a level plain on which to walk in order to encounter the glory of the Lord. We have come to the 'point': let us be taught hope. Let us be confident as we await the coming of the Lord, and what the desert may represent in our life — each one knows what desert he or she is walking in — it will become a garden in bloom. Hope does not disappoint!

2

How beautiful on the mountain are the feet of those who bring peace (Is 52)

General audience of 14 December 2016

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

We are coming close to Christmas, and the prophet Isaiah once again helps us to open ourselves to the hope of welcoming the Good News of the coming of salvation.

Isaiah Chapter 52 begins with the invitation addressed to Jerusalem to awake, shake off the dust and chains, and put on the most beautiful clothes, because the Lord has come to free his people (vv. 1-3). And he adds: “my people shall know my name; therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here am I” (v. 6). It is to this “here am I” said by the Lord, which sums up his firm will for salvation and closeness to us, that Jerusalem responds with a song of joy, according to the prophet’s invitation. It is a very important historic moment. It is the end of the Babylonian Exile; it is the opportunity for Israel to rediscover God and, in faith, rediscover itself. The Lord is near, and the “remnant”, that is, the small population which survived the Exile and whose faith endured while in exile, which had undergone crises and continued to believe and hope even in the midst of darkness, that “remnant” will be able to see the wonders of God.

At this point, the prophet includes a song of exaltation:

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings, / who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good, / who publishes salvation, / who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns’ Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem; / for the Lord has comforted his people, / he has redeemed Jerusalem./ The

Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; / and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (Is 52:7, 9-10).

These words of Isaiah, upon which we want to linger a while, make reference to the miracle of peace, and do so in a very specific way, placing the gaze not on the messenger but on his feet which are running quickly: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings...”.

He is like the spouse in the Cantic of Canticles who runs towards his beloved: “Behold, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills” (Cant. 2:8). Thus, even the messenger of peace runs, bringing the happy announcement of liberation, of salvation, and proclaiming that God reigns.

God has not abandoned his people, and he has not left them to be vanquished by evil, because he is faithful, and his grace is greater than sin. We must learn this, because we are stubborn and do not learn. However, I ask: what is greater, God or sin? God! And which is victorious to the end? God or sin? God. Is he able to defeat the most serious, most shameful, the most terrible sin, the worst of sins? With what weapon does God defeat sin? With love! This means that “God reigns”; these are the words of faith in a Lord whose power bends down to humanity, stoops down, to offer mercy and to free man and woman from all that disfigures in them the beautiful image of God, for when we are in sin, God’s image is disfigured. The fulfillment of so much love will be the very Kingdom instituted by Jesus, that Kingdom of forgiveness and peace which we celebrate at Christmas, and which is definitively achieved at Easter. And the most beautiful joy of Christmas is that interior joy of peace: the Lord has remitted my sins, the Lord has forgiven me, the Lord has had mercy on me, he came to save me. This is the joy of Christmas!

These are, Brothers and Sisters, the reasons for our hope. When everything seems finished, when, faced with many negative realities, and faith becomes demanding, and there comes the temptation which says that nothing makes sense anymore, behold instead the beautiful news brought by those swift feet: God is coming to fulfil something

new, to establish a kingdom of peace. God has “bared his arm” and comes to bring freedom and consolation. Evil will not triumph forever; there is an end to suffering. Despair is defeated because God is among us.

And we too are urged to awake a little, like Jerusalem, according to the invitation of the prophet; we are called to become men and women of hope, cooperating in the coming of this Kingdom made of light and destined for all, men and women of hope. How bad is it when we find a Christian who has lost hope! “But, I don’t hope in anything; everything is finished for me”: thus says a Christian who is incapable of looking to the horizons of hope, and before whose heart there is only a wall. However, God destroys such walls with forgiveness! And for this reason we must pray, that each day God may give us hope and give it to everyone: that hope which arises when we see God in the crib in Bethlehem. The message of the Good News entrusted to us is urgent. We too must run like the messenger on the mountains, because the world cannot wait, humanity is hungry and thirsty for justice, truth, peace.

And seeing the little Child of Bethlehem, the little ones of the world will know that the promise was accomplished; the message is fulfilled. In a newborn baby, in need of everything, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, there is enclosed all of the power of God who saves. Christmas is a day which opens the heart: we need to open our heart to this littleness which is there in that Child, and to that great wonder. It is the wonder of Christmas, for which we are preparing, with hope, in this Season of Advent. It is the surprise of a Child God, of a poor God, of a weak God, of a God who abandons his greatness to come close to each one of us.

3

The birth of Jesus, source of our hope

General audience of 21 December 2016

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

We have recently begun a catechetical journey on the theme of hope, which is so very appropriate in the Season of Advent. The Prophet Isaiah has guided us up to this point. Today, just days before Christmas, I would like to reflect more specifically on the moment in which, so to speak, *hope came into the world*, with the incarnation of the Son of God. It was also Isaiah who foretold the birth of the Messiah in several passages: “Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (7:14); and also: “there shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots” (11:1). In these passages, the meaning of Christmas shines through: God fulfills the promise by becoming man; not abandoning his people, he draws near to the point of stripping himself of his divinity. In this way God shows his fidelity and inaugurates a new Kingdom, which gives *a new hope to mankind*. And what is this hope? Eternal life.

When we speak of hope, often it refers to what is not in man’s power to realize, which is invisible. In fact, what we hope for goes beyond our strength and our perception. But the Birth of Christ, inaugurating redemption, speaks to us of a different hope, a dependable, visible and understandable hope, because it is founded in God. He comes into the world and gives us the strength to walk with him: God walks with us in Jesus, and walking with him toward the fullness of life gives us the strength to dwell in the present in a new way, albeit arduous. Thus for a Christian, to hope means the certainty of being on a journey with Christ toward the Father who awaits us. Hope is never still; hope is always journeying, and it makes us journey. This hope, which the Child of

Bethlehem gives us, offers a destination, a sure, ongoing goal, salvation of mankind, blessedness to those who trust in a merciful God. Saint Paul summarizes all this with the expression: “in this hope we were saved” (Rom 8:24). In other words, walking in this world, with hope, we are saved. Here we can ask ourselves the question, each one of us: am I walking with hope or is my interior life static, closed? Is my heart a locked drawer or a drawer open to the hope which enables me to walk — not alone — with Jesus?

In Christian homes, during the Season of Advent, *the Nativity scene* is arranged, according to the tradition which dates back to Saint Francis of Assisi. In its simple way, the Nativity scene conveys hope; each one of the characters is immersed in this atmosphere of hope.

First of all we note the place in which Jesus was born: *Bethlehem*. A small village in Judea where, thousands of years earlier, David was born, the shepherd boy chosen by God to be the King of Israel. Bethlehem is not a capital city, and for this reason is preferred by divine Providence, who loves to act through the little ones and the humble. In that birthplace was born the highly anticipated “Son of David”, Jesus, in whom the hope of God and the hope of man meet.

Then we look to *Mary*, Mother of hope. With her ‘yes’ she opened the door of our world to God: her maiden’s heart was full of hope, wholly enlivened by faith; and thus God chose her and she believed in his word. She, who for nine months was the Ark of the new and eternal Covenant, in the grotto, contemplates the Child and sees in him the love of God, who comes to save his people and the whole of humanity.

Next to Mary is *Joseph*, a descendant of Jesse and of David; he too believed in the words of the angel, and looking at Jesus in the manger, reflects on the fact that that Child has come from the Holy Spirit, and that God himself commanded him to call [the Child] ‘Jesus’. In that name there is hope for every man and woman, because through that son of woman, God will save mankind from death and from sin. This is why it is important to contemplate the Nativity scene!

In the Nativity scene there are also *shepherds*, who represent the

humble and poor who await the Messiah, the “consolation of Israel” (Lk 2:25), and the “redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38). In this Child they see the realization of the promises and hope that the salvation of God will finally arrive for each of them. Those who trust in their own certainties, especially material, do not await God’s salvation. Let us keep this in mind: our own assurance will not save us; the only certainty that will save us is that of hope in God. It will save us because it is strong and enables us to journey in life with joy, with the will to do good, with the will to attain eternal happiness. The little ones, the shepherds, instead trust in God, hope in him and rejoice when they recognize in that Child the sign indicated by the angels (cf. Lk 2:12).

The very *choir of angels* proclaims from on high the great design that the Child fulfills: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased” (2:14). Christian hope is expressed in praise and gratitude to God, who has initiated his Kingdom of love, justice and peace.

Dear brothers and sisters, in these days, contemplating the Nativity scene, we prepare ourselves for the Birth of the Lord. It will truly be a celebration if we welcome Jesus, the seed of hope that God sets down in the furrows of our individual and community history. Every ‘yes’ to Jesus who comes, is a bud of hope. Let us trust in this bud of hope, in this ‘yes’: “Yes, Jesus, you can save me, you can save me”. Happy Christmas of hope to all!

Abraham, father in faith and hope

General audience of 28 December 2016

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Abraham's hope against all hope was the theme of the Holy Father's catechesis during this Wednesday's general audience in the Paul VI Hall. The Pope explained that St. Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, tells us of the faith in God of the patriarch, to whom He had promised a descendant even though he was almost a hundred years old and his wife, Sara, was barren. "This is a powerful concept", said Francis. "Even when there is no hope, I hope. ... There was no human hope ... but he hoped".

Trusting in this promise, Abraham sets out on his journey, agrees to leave his land and become an outsider, hope in this 'impossible' son that God would have given him even though by then it was as if Sara's womb was dead. Abraham believed, his faith opened him up to a seemingly irrational hope; it is the capacity to go beyond human reason, wisdom and the prudence of the world, beyond what is normally considered to be common sense, to believe in the impossible. Hope opens up new horizons, making us capable of dreaming of what is not even imaginable. ... The virtue of hope is that it gives us great strength to go on in life".

But it is a difficult journey. And even for Abraham there arrives the moment of the crisis of despair. He had trusted, he left his home, his land, his friends ... everything. He arrived in the land that God had indicated to him, time passed. but the son did not come, and Sara's womb remained closed in its barrenness. And", continued the Pope, "Abraham, I don't say that he lost his patience, but he lamented with the Lord. This too we can learn from our father Abraham: complaining

with the Lord is a way of praying. At times I hear, when I confess, ‘I complained to the Lord’, and I say, ‘No, go ahead, complain! He is our Father!’ And this is a way of praying: lamenting with the Lord, this is good. Abraham laments with the Lord, saying ‘Lord God ... I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus’ (Eliezer was the one who ran everything). Abraham continued, ‘Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir’. And the Lord answered, ‘This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir. And He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them”. Then He said to him, “So shall your offspring be”’. And once more Abraham believed the Lord.

“The scene takes place at night; outside it is dark, but also in the heart of Abraham there is the darkness of disappointment, discouragement, the difficulty of continuing to hope for something impossible. By this point the patriarch is elderly, and it seems that there is no longer time for a son, and it will be a servant who will inherit everything. Abraham addresses the Lord, but God, even though He is present and speaks with him, seems distant now, as if He had not been true to His word. Abraham feels alone; he is old and tired. ... How can he continue to trust? And yet”, continued Francis, “this lament of his is a form of faith, it is a prayer. Despite everything, Abraham continues to believe in God and to hope that something might still happen. Otherwise, why call upon the Lord, complain with Him, remind Him of His promises? Faith is not only the silence that accepts everything without replying; hope is not the certainty that shelters you from doubt and perplexity. Often hope is dark, but it is then that hope carries you forward. Faith is also struggling with God, showing Him our bitterness, without pious pretences. ‘I got angry with God, and I told him this, this and this...’ – but He is our Father, He understands you: go in peace! We must have this courage! And this is hope. And hope is also not being afraid of seeing reality for what it is and accepting its contradictions”.

Abraham, with faith, asks God to help Him to continue to hope. It is curious: he does not ask for a son. He says, ‘Help me continue to hope’, he prays for hope. And the Lord responds, insisting with His unlikely

promise: it will not be the servant who is his heir, but a son of his own, born of Abraham, begotten by him. Nothing changes, on God's part. He continues to repeat what He had already said, and does not offer reassurances to Abraham. His only security is to trust in the word of the Lord and to continue to hope".

"And that sign that God gives Abraham is a request to continue to believe and to hope: 'Look toward heaven and number the stars ... So shall your offspring be'. ... God takes Abraham outside his tent, in the reality of his limited point of view, and shows him the stars. To believe, we must see with the eyes of faith: they are only stars, everyone can see them, but for Abraham they must become the sign of God's fidelity".

"This is faith, this is the journey of hope that every one of us must make", Francis concluded. "If for us, too, the only chance remaining is that of looking to the stars, then it is time to trust in God. There is nothing more beautiful. Hope never disappoints".

5

Rachel “weeps for her children” but “there is hope in her descendants” (Jer 31)

General audience of 4 January 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

In today's catechesis, I would like to reflect with you on the figure of a woman who speaks to us about hope lived in tears. Hope lived in tears. This is Rachel, wife of Jacob and mother of Joseph and Benjamin: she who, as the Book of Genesis tells us, dies while giving birth to her second-born son, which is Benjamin.

The Prophet Jeremiah refers to Rachel as he addresses the Israelites in exile, trying to console them with words full of emotion and poetry; that is, he takes up Rachel's lament, but gives hope:

“Thus says the Lord: ‘A voice is heard in Ramah, / lamentation and bitter weeping. / Rachel is weeping for her children; / she refuses to be comforted for her children, / because they are not’” (Jer 31:15).

In these verses, Jeremiah presents this woman of his people, the great matriarch of the tribe, in a situation of suffering and tears, but along with an unexpected outlook on life. Rachel, who in the Genesis account had died in childbirth and had accepted that death so that her son might live, is now instead represented by the Prophet as alive in Ramah, where the deportees gathered, weeping for the children who in a certain sense died going into exile; children who, as she herself says, ‘are no more’, they are lost forever.

For this reason Rachel does not want to be consoled. This refusal of hers expresses the depth of her pain and the bitterness of her tears. Before the tragedy of the loss of her children, a mother cannot accept words or gestures of consolation, which are always inadequate, never

capable of alleviating the pain of a wound that cannot and does not want to be healed, a pain proportionate to love.

Every mother knows all of this; and today too, there are many mothers who weep, who do not accept the loss of a child, inconsolable before a death that is impossible to accept. Rachel holds within her the pain of all the mothers of the world, of all time, and the tears of every human being who suffers irreparable loss.

This refusal of Rachel, who does not want to be consoled, also teaches us how much sensitivity is asked of us before other people's suffering. In order to speak of hope to those who are desperate, it is essential to share their desperation. In order to dry the tears from the faces of those who are suffering, it is necessary to join our tears with theirs. Only in this way can our words be really capable of giving a little hope. If I cannot speak words in this way, with tears, with suffering, then silence is better: a caress, a gesture and no words.

God, with his sensitivity and his love, responds to Rachel's tears with true words, not contrived; in fact Jeremiah's text continues in this way:

“Thus says the Lord:” — he responds to those tears — “Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; / for your work shall be rewarded, says the Lord, / and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. / There is hope for your future, says the Lord, / and your children shall come back to their own country” (Jer 31:16-17).

Precisely through the mother's tears, there is still hope for the children, who will return to life. This woman, who had accepted death at the moment of childbirth, so that the child might live, is, with her tears, the beginning of new life for the children who are exiled, prisoners, far from their homeland. To the suffering and bitter tears of Rachel the Lord responds with a promise that can now be the source of true consolation for her: the people will be able to return from exile and freely experience in faith their own relationship with God. The tears generated hope. This is not easy to understand, but it is true. So often, in our life, tears sow hope; they are seeds of hope.

As we know, this text of Jeremiah is later taken up by the Evangelist

Matthew and applied to the massacre of the innocents (cf. 2:16-18). A text which places before us the tragedy of the killing of defenceless human beings, the horror of power which scorns and terminates life. The children of Bethlehem die because of Jesus. And he, the innocent Lamb, would then die, in turn, for all of us. The Son of God entered the suffering of mankind. This must not be forgotten. When someone addresses me and asks me difficult questions, for example: 'Tell me, Father: why do children suffer?', truly, I do not know how to respond. I say only: 'Look at the Crucifix: God gave us his Son, he suffered, and perhaps you will find an answer there'. But there are no answers here [pointing to his head]. Just looking at the love of God who gives his Son who offers his life for us can indicate some path of consolation. For this reason we say that the Son of God entered the pain of mankind; he shared it and embraced death; his Word is definitively the word of consolation, because it is born of suffering.

And on the Cross it will be He, the dying Son, to give new fertility to his mother, entrusting to her the disciple John and making her mother of the people of faith. Death is conquered, and thus Jeremiah's Prophecy is fulfilled. Mary's tears, too, like those of Rachel, generated hope and new life. Thank you.

6

False hope in idols (Psalm 115)

General audience of 11 January 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

In the month of December and in the first part of January we celebrated the Season of Advent and then Christmas: a period of the liturgical year that reawakens hope in God's people. Hope is a basic human need: hope for the future, belief in life, so-called "positive thinking".

But it is important that this hope be placed in what can really help you to live and give meaning to our existence. This is why Scripture warns us against the *false hopes* that the world presents to us, exposing their uselessness and demonstrating their foolishness. It does so in various ways, but especially by denouncing the falsehood of the *idols* in which man is continually tempted to place his trust, making them the object of his hope.

The prophets and scholars in particular insist on this, touching a nerve centre of the believer's journey of faith. Because faith means trusting in God — those who have faith trust in God — but there's a moment when, in meeting life's difficulties, man experiences the fragility of that trust and feels the need for various certainties — for tangible, concrete assurances. I entrust myself to God, but the situation is rather serious and I need a little more concrete reassurance. And there lies the danger! And then we are tempted to seek even ephemeral consolations that seem to fill the void of loneliness and alleviate the fatigue of believing. And we think we can find them in the security that money can give, in alliances with the powerful, in worldliness, in false ideologies. Sometimes we look for them in a god that can bend to our requests and magically intervene to change the situation and make it as

we wish; an idol, indeed, that in itself can do nothing. It is impotent and deceptive. But we like idols; we love them! Once, in Buenos Aires, I had to go from one church to another, a thousand meters, more or less. And I did so on foot. And between them there is a park, and in the park there were little tables, where many, many fortune tellers were sitting. It was full of people who were even waiting in line. You would give them your hand and they'd begin, but the conversation was always the same: 'there is a woman in your life, there is a darkness that comes, but everything will be fine ...'. And then, you paid. And this gives you security? It is the security of — allow me to use the word — nonsense. Going to a seer or to a fortune teller who reads cards: this is an idol! This is the idol, and when we are so attached to them, we buy false hope. Whereas, in that gratuitous hope, which Jesus Christ brought us, freely giving his life for us, sometimes we fail to fully trust.

A Psalm brimming with wisdom depicts in a very suggestive way the falsity of these idols that the world offers for our hope and on which men of all ages are tempted to rely. It is Psalm 115, which is recited as follows:

“Their idols are silver and gold, / the work of men’s hands. / They have mouths, but do not speak; / eyes, but do not see. / They have ears, but do not hear; / noses, but do not smell. / They have hands, but do not feel; / feet, but do not walk; / and they do not make a sound in their throat. / Those who make them are like them; / so are all who trust in them!” (vv. 4-8).

The psalmist also presents to us, a bit ironically, the absolutely ephemeral character of these idols. And we must understand that these are not merely figures made of metal or other materials but are also those we build in our minds: when we trust in limited realities that we transform into absolute values, or when we diminish God to fit our own template and our ideas of divinity; a god that looks like us is understandable, predictable, just like the idols mentioned in the Psalm. Man, the image of God, manufactures a god in his own image, and it is also a poorly realized image. It does not hear, does not act, and above all, it cannot speak. But, we are happier to turn to idols than to turn to

the Lord. Many times, we are happier with the ephemeral hope that this false idol gives us, than with the great and sure hope that the Lord gives us.

In contrast to hoping in a Lord of life who, through his Word created the world and leads our existence, [we turn to] dumb effigies. Ideologies with their claim to the absolute, wealth — and this is a great idol — power and success, vanity, with their illusion of eternity and omnipotence, values such as physical beauty and health: when they become idols to which everything is sacrificed, they are all things that confuse the mind and the heart, and instead of supporting life, they lead to death. It is terrible to hear, and painful to the soul: something that once, years ago, I heard in the Diocese of Buenos Aires: a good woman — very beautiful — boasted about her beauty. She said, as if it were natural: ‘Yes, I had to have an abortion because my figure is very important’. These are idols, and they lead you down the wrong path, and do not give you happiness.

The message of the Psalm is very clear: if you place hope in idols, you become like them: hollow images with hands that do not feel, feet that do not walk, mouths that cannot speak. You no longer have anything to say; you become unable to help, to change things, unable to smile, to give of yourself, incapable of love. And we, men of the Church, run this risk when we “become worldly”. We need to abide in the world but defend ourselves from the world’s illusions, which are these idols that I mentioned.

As the Psalm continues, we must trust and hope in God, and God will bestow the blessing. So says the Psalm: “O Israel, trust in the Lord.... O House of Aaron, put your trust in the Lord.... You who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord.... The Lord has been mindful of us; he will bless us” (vv. 9, 10, 11, 12).

The Lord always remembers. Even in the bad times he remembers us. And this is our hope. And hope does not disappoint. Never. Never. Idols always disappoint; they are make-believe; they are not real. Here is the wonderful reality of hope: in trusting in the Lord, we become like him. His blessing transforms us into his children who share in his life. Hope

in God allows us to enter, so to speak, within the range of his remembrance, of his memory that blesses us and saves us. And it is then that a Hallelujah can burst forth in praise to the living and true God, who was born for us of Mary, died on the Cross and rose again in glory. And in this God we have hope, and this God — who is not an idol — never disappoints.

Jonah: hope and prayer

General audience of 18 January 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

In Sacred Scripture, among the prophets of Israel, a rather anomalous figure stands out, a prophet who attempts to avoid the Lord's call by refusing to place himself at the service of the divine plan of salvation. It is the Prophet Jonah, whose story is narrated in a small book of only four chapters, a type of parable that bears a great lesson, that of the mercy of God who forgives.

Jonah is a prophet "going out" and also a prophet in flight! He is an "out-going" prophet whom God sends "to the periphery", to Nineveh, in order to convert the people of that great city. But Nineveh, to an Israelite like Jonah, was a threatening reality, the enemy which placed Jerusalem itself in peril, and therefore was to be destroyed, certainly not to be saved. Therefore, when God sent Jonah to preach in that city, the prophet, who knows the Lord's goodness and his desire to forgive, seeks to avoid his task and flees.

During his flight, the prophet enters into contact with pagans, the mariners on the ship that he boarded in order to distance himself from God and from his mission. And he flees far, because Nineveh was in the area of Iraq and he fled to Spain, he seriously fled. And it was actually the behaviour of these pagan men, as that of the people of Nineveh later on, that today allows us to reflect a bit on the *hope* which, in the face of danger and death, *is expressed in prayer*.

Indeed, during the sea voyage, a mighty tempest breaks out, and Jonah goes down to the ship's cargo hold and falls asleep. The mariners, however, seeing themselves lost, "each cried to his god": they were pagans (Jon 1:5). The captain of the ship wakes Jonah, saying to

him: “What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call upon your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we do not perish” (Jon 1:6).

The reaction of these ‘pagans’ is the right reaction in the face of death, in the face of danger; because it is then that man fully experiences his frailty and his need for salvation.

The instinctive dread of dying reveals the necessity of *hope in the God of life*. “Perhaps God will give a thought to us, that we do not perish” are the words of hope which become prayer, that supplication filled with anguish which rises to the lips of mankind in the face of an imminent danger of death.

We too easily disdain the turning to God in need as if it were only a prayer of self-interest, and therefore imperfect. But God knows our weakness. He knows that we remember him in order to ask for help, and with the indulging smile of a father, God responds benevolently.

When Jonah, recognizing his responsibility, throws himself into the sea in order to save his travel companions, the storm quiets down. Incumbent death led those pagan men to prayer, enabling the prophet, in spite of it all, to live his vocation in service to others, sacrificing himself for them, and now he leads the survivors to recognize and praise the true Lord. The mariners who, in the grip of fear, had prayed to their gods, now, with sincere fear of the Lord, recognize the true God, offer sacrifices and make vows. Hope, which had induced them to pray to be spared from death, is revealed as even more powerful and ushers in a reality that goes even beyond what they were hoping: not only do they not perish in the storm, but they become open to recognizing the one true Lord of heaven and earth.

Afterwards, even the people of Nineveh, in the face of the prospect of being destroyed, *pray, spurred by hope in God’s forgiveness*. They do penance, invoke the Lord and convert to him, beginning with the king who, like the ship’s captain, gives voice to hope: “Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we perish not?” (Jon 3:9). For them too, as for the crew in the storm, facing death and being

saved from it led them to the truth. Thus under divine mercy, and even more in the light of the Paschal Mystery, death can become, as it was for Saint Francis of Assisi, “our sister death” and represent, for every person and for each one of us, the surprising occasion to know hope and encounter the Lord. May the Lord help us to understand this link between prayer and hope. Prayer leads you forward in hope, and when things become dark, more prayer is needed! And there will be more hope. Thank you.

8

Judith: the courage of a woman gives hope to the people

General audience of 25 January 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Among the figures of women presented to us by the Old Testament, one great heroine stands out among the people: Judith. The biblical Book which bears her name recounts the massive military campaign of King Nebuchadnezzar who, ruling over Nineveh, expands the boundaries of the empire by defeating and enslaving all the surrounding peoples. The reader understands he is faced with a great, invincible enemy who is spreading death and destruction, and who reaches the Promised Land, placing the lives of Israel's children in jeopardy.

Indeed, Nebuchadnezzar's army, under the leadership of General Holofernes, lays siege to a Judean city, Bethulia, cutting off the water supply and thus wearing down the people's resistance.

The situation is dramatic, to the point that the city's inhabitants turn to the elders, demanding that they surrender to the enemy. Their words are desperate: "For now we have no one to help us; God has sold us into their hands, to strew us on the ground before them with thirst and utter destruction". They have reached the point of saying this: "God has sold us"; the people's desperation was great. "Now call them in and surrender the whole city to the army of Holofernes and to all his forces, to be plundered" (Judith 7:25-26). The end now seems inevitable, the ability to trust in God is exhausted. The ability to trust in God is exhausted. And how often do we reach the limit of a situation, where we do not even feel able to have faith in the Lord. It is a terrible temptation! And, paradoxically, it seems that, to escape death, there's

nothing left but to surrender oneself into the hands of those who kill. They know that these soldiers have come to loot the city, to take the women as slaves and then kill everyone else. This really is “the limit”.

And faced with so much despair, the leader of the people attempts to offer a foothold for hope: resist for five more days, waiting for God’s salvific intervention. However, it is a weak hope which makes him decide: “But if these days pass by, and no help comes for us, I will do what you say” (7:31). Poor man: he has no way out. God is given five days — and here is the sin — God is given five days to intervene; five days of waiting, but already with the prospect of the end. They give God five days to save them, but they know they do not have faith, and are expecting the worst. In fact, there is no one among the people still capable of hope. They were desperate.

It is in this situation that Judith appears on the scene. A widow, a woman of great beauty and wisdom, she speaks to the people with the language of faith. Courageously, she reproaches the people to their face, (saying): “You are putting the Lord Almighty to the test... No, my brethren, do not provoke the Lord our God to anger. For if he does not choose to help us within these five days, he has power to protect us within any time he pleases, or even to destroy us in the presence of our enemies... Therefore, while we wait for his deliverance, let us call upon him to help us, and he will hear our voice, if it pleases him” (8:13, 14-15, 17). It is the language of hope. Let us knock on the doors to God’s heart. He is the Father; he can save us. This woman, a widow, even risks making a fool of herself in front of others. But, she is courageous. She goes forward! This is my opinion: women are more courageous than men. [Applause]

And with the strength of a prophet, Judith rebukes the men of her people to restore their faith in God; with the gaze of a prophet, she sees beyond the narrow horizon proposed by the leaders, and which fear limits even further. God will surely act, she says, while the proposal of waiting five days is a way to tempt him and escape his will. The Lord is the God of Salvation — and she believed this — whatever form it may take. It is salvation to liberate from enemies and to bring life, but, in his

impenetrable plans, it can also be salvation to allow death. A woman of faith, she knows this. Thus we know the end, how the story ends: God saves.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us never set conditions for God, and let us instead allow hope to conquer our fears. Entrusting ourselves to God means entering into his plans without demanding anything, and also accepting that his salvation and his help come to us in ways that differ from our expectations. We ask the Lord for life, for health, for love, for happiness; and it is right to do so, but with the understanding that God is able to bring life even from death, that we can experience peace even in sickness, and that there can be calm even in loneliness, and happiness even in tears. It is not for us to instruct God about what he must do, about what we need. He knows better than we do, and we must have faith, because his ways and his thoughts are different from ours.

The path which Judith shows us is one of faith, of waiting peacefully, of prayer, and of obedience. It is the path of hope. Without simple resignation, doing everything within our power, but always remaining in the furrow of the Lord's will, because — as we know — she prayed so much, spoke a great deal to the people and then, courageously, she went, looked for a way to get close to the leader of the army, and managed to cut off his head, to slit his throat. She is courageous in faith and in deeds. And she always seeks out the Lord! Judith, in fact, had her own plan, carried it out successfully, and led the people to victory, but always with the attitude of faith of those who accept everything from the hand of God, certain of his goodness.

Thus, a woman full of faith and courage restores strength to her people who are in mortal danger, and guides them along the paths of hope, also pointing them out to us. And, if we reflect a little, how often have we heard the wise, courageous words of humble people, of humble women who are thought of as — without disregarding them — perhaps ignorant.... However, they are words of God's wisdom! The words of grandmothers... how often do grandmothers know the right thing to say, the word of hope, because they have life experience. They have

suffered greatly; they have entrusted themselves to God, and the Lord gives this gift of encouraging us to hope. And, going along those paths, there will be Paschal joy and light in entrusting oneself to the Lord with Jesus' words: "Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (Lk 22:42). And this is the prayer of wisdom, of faith, and of hope.

The helmet of hope (1 Thes 5:4-11)

General audience of 1 February 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

At the last catechesis we began to explore the theme of hope, rereading in this perspective several pages of the Old Testament. Now we should like to move on to shed light on the extraordinary importance that this virtue assumed in the New Testament, when it met with the novelty represented by Jesus Christ and from the Paschal event: Christian hope. We Christians are men and women of hope.

It is what clearly emerges in the very first text that was written, namely, the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians. In the passage we have heard, one can perceive all the freshness and beauty of the first Christian proclamation. Thessalonica is a young community, quite recently founded; yet, despite the difficulties and the many trials, it is rooted in the faith, and celebrates with enthusiasm and joy the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus. So the Apostle congratulates everyone warmly, as, reborn in the Paschal Mystery, they become truly “sons of light and sons of the day” (5:5), by virtue of their full communion with Christ.

When Paul writes to them, the community of Thessalonica has just been established, and only a few years separate it from Christ’s Easter event. For this reason, the Apostle tries to make everyone understand all the effects and consequences that this unique and decisive event, namely, what the Resurrection of the Lord signifies for history and for the life of each one. In particular, the community had difficulty not so much in recognizing the Resurrection of Jesus, everyone believed it, but in believing in the resurrection of the dead. Yes, Jesus is Risen, but the difficulty was in believing that the dead would rise. In this sense, this

Letter is more relevant than ever. Each time we face our death, or that of a person who is dear, we feel that our faith is put to the test. All our doubts emerge, all our frailty, and we ask ourselves: “But will there truly be life after death...? Will I still be able to see and embrace again the people I have loved...?”. A woman asked me this question several days ago in an audience, revealing doubt: ‘Will I meet my loved ones?’. In the current context, we too need to return to the root and foundation of our faith, so as to become aware of how much God did for us in Jesus Christ and what our death means. We all have a little fear due to this uncertainty about death. It reminds me of an elderly man, a kind old man, who said: ‘I am not afraid of death. I am a bit afraid of seeing it approaching’. He was afraid of this.

Paul, before the fears and perplexity of the community, urges it to wear firmly on the head like a helmet, “the hope of salvation”, especially in the trials and most difficult times of our life. It is a helmet. This is what Christian hope is. When we speak about hope we can be led to interpret it according to the common meaning of the term, that is, in reference to something beautiful that we desire, but which may or may not be attained. We hope it will happen; it is as a desire. People say, for example: “I hope there will be good weather tomorrow!”; but we know that there might be bad weather the following day.... Christian hope is not like this. Christian hope is the expectation of something that has already been fulfilled; the door is there, and I hope to reach the door. What do I have to do? Walk toward the door! I am certain that I will reach the door. This is how Christian hope is: having the certainty that I am walking toward something that is, not something that I hope may be. This is Christian hope. Christian hope is the expectation of something that has already been fulfilled and which will certainly be fulfilled for each one of us. Our resurrection too, and that of our departed loved ones, therefore, is not something that may or may not happen, but is a certain reality, because it is rooted in the event of Christ’s Resurrection. Thus, to hope means to learn how to live in expectation. Learn how to live in expectation and find life. When a woman realizes she is pregnant, every day she learns to live in the expectation of seeing the gaze of that child that is to come. In this way

too, we must live and learn from these human expectations and live in the expectation of seeing the Lord, of encountering the Lord. This is not easy, but we can learn: to live in expectation. To hope means and entails a humble heart, a poor heart. Only a poor man knows how to wait. Those who are already full of themselves and of their achievements, are not able to place their trust in anyone other than themselves.

Saint Paul writes further: “Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him” (1 Thes 5:10). These words always generate great comfort and peace. Therefore, we are also called to pray for the beloved people who have left us, that they may live in Christ and be in full communion with us. Something that touches my heart deeply is an expression of Saint Paul, also addressed to the Thessalonians. It fills me with certain hope. Thus, he says: “and so we shall always be with the Lord” (4:17). It is wonderful: everything passes but, after death, we shall always be with the Lord. It is the total certainty of hope, the same which, long before, made Job exclaim: “I know that my Redeemer lives,... whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold” (Job 19:25, 27). And so we shall always be with the Lord. Do you believe this? I am asking you: do you believe this? In order to feel stronger I invite you to say it with me three times: ‘And so we shall always be with the Lord’. And there, with the Lord, we will meet. Thus, let us ask the Lord to teach our heart to hope in the resurrection, this way we can learn to live in the certain expectation of the encounter with him and with all our loved ones.

Hope, source of consolation and peace (1 Thes 5:12-22)

General audience of 8 February 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Last Wednesday we saw that Saint Paul, in the First Letter to the Thessalonians, exhorts them to remain deeply rooted in the hope of resurrection (cf. 5:4-11), with that beautiful phrase: “we shall always be with the Lord” (4:17). In the same context, the Apostle shows that *Christian hope* has not only a personal, individual scope, but a *communitarian, ecclesial* one. We all hope; we all have hope, also as a community.

For this reason, the gaze is immediately broadened by Paul to all the situations that comprise the Christian community, asking them to pray for one another and to support each other. That we help each other. But not only that we help each other in need, in the many needs of daily life, but help each other *to hope*, support one another in hope. It is not a coincidence that we begin precisely by referring to *those who are entrusted with responsibility and pastoral guidance*. They are the first to be called to nourish hope, and this is not because they are better than the others, but by virtue of a divine ministry that goes far beyond their strength. For this reason, they need, more than ever, everyone’s respect, understanding and benevolent support.

Attention is then placed on the *brothers and sisters most at risk of losing hope*, of succumbing to despair. We always hear news of people who succumb to despair and do bad things.... Despair leads them to many bad things. The reference is to one who is discouraged, who is weak, who feels discouraged by the burden of life and of his own faults, and no longer manages to pick himself up. In these cases, the closeness

and warmth of the entire Church must be even more intense and loving, and must take on the exquisite form of compassion, which is not simply sympathy: compassion is to endure with the other, to suffer with the other, to draw near to the one who is suffering. A word, a caress, but given from the heart; this is compassion. For the one who needs comfort and consolation. This is more important than ever: Christian hope cannot do without genuine and concrete charity. The Apostle to the Gentiles himself, in the Letter to the Romans, affirms with his heart in his hand: “We who are strong” — for we have faith, hope, or we do not have many difficulties — “ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves” (15:1). To bear with, to bear with the weaknesses of others. This witness, then, does not remain closed within the confines of the Christian community: it echoes in all its vigour even outside it, in the social and civil context, as an appeal not to build walls but bridges, not to exchange evil for evil, but to conquer evil with good, offence with forgiveness — a Christian must never say: ‘you will pay for this!’. Never; this is not a Christian gesture; offence is defeated by forgiveness — to live in peace with everyone. This is the Church! And this is what motivates Christian hope, when it takes a strong line while maintaining love at the same time. Love is strong and tender. It is beautiful.

Thus one understands that one does not learn to hope alone. No one learns to hope alone. It is impossible. Hope, to be nourished, *necessarily needs a ‘body’*, in which the various members support and revive each other. This means, then, that if we hope, it is because many of our brothers and sisters have taught us to hope and have kept our hope alive. Distinguishable among these are *the little ones, the poor, the simple, and the marginalized*. Yes, because one who is enclosed within his own wellbeing does not know hope: he hopes only in his wellbeing and this is not hope: it is relative security; one who is enclosed in his own fulfillment, who always feels that all is well, does not know hope. Instead, those who hope are those who each day experience trials, precariousness and their own limitations. These brothers and sisters of ours give us the strongest, most beautiful witness, because they stand firm, trusting in the Lord, knowing that, beyond the sadness,

oppression and inevitability of death, the last word will be his, and it will be a word of mercy, of life and of peace. Whoever hopes, hopes to one day hear this word: “Come, come to me, brother; come, come to me, sister, for all eternity”.

Dear friends, if — as we have said — the natural dwelling of our hope is a supportive ‘body’, in the case of Christian hope this body is *the Church*, while the vital breath, the soul of this hope is *the Holy Spirit*. Without the Holy Spirit one cannot have hope. Here then is why the Apostle Paul invites us to continuously invoke it to the end. If it is not easy to believe, it is far less easy to hope. It is more difficult to hope than to believe; it is more difficult. But when the Holy Spirit abides in our hearts, it is he who makes us understand that we must not fear, that the Lord is near and takes care of us; and it is he who forms our communities, in a perennial Pentecost, as a living sign of hope for the human family. Thank you.

Hope does not disappoint (cf. Rom 5:1-5)

General audience of 15 February 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

From the time we were small we are taught that it is not nice to boast. In my land, those who boast are called ‘pavoni’ (peacocks). It is right, because boasting about what one is or what one has, apart from a certain arrogance, also reveals a lack of respect toward others, especially toward those who are less fortunate than we are. In this passage from the Letter to the Romans, however, the Apostle Paul surprises us, as at least twice he exhorts us to boast. Of what, then, is it right to boast? Because if he exhorts us to boast, it is right to boast about something. And how is it possible to do this, without offending others, without excluding someone?

In the first case, we are invited to *boast of the abundance of the grace with which we are permeated in Jesus Christ*, by way of the faith. Paul wants to make us understand that, if we learn to read everything in the light of the Holy Spirit, we realize that everything is grace! Everything is a gift! If we pay attention, in fact — in history, as in our life — it is not only we who are acting, but above all it is God. He is the absolute protagonist who creates every thing as a gift of love, who weaves his plan of salvation and who leads it to fulfillment for us, through his Son Jesus. We are asked to recognize all this, to welcome it with gratitude and to make it become a source of praise, of blessing and of great joy. If we do this, we are at peace with God and we experience freedom. This peace is then extended to all areas and to all the relationships of our life: we are at peace with ourselves, we are at peace in our family, in our community, at work and with the people we encounter each day on our journey.

Paul, however, exhorts us to *boast even in tribulation*. This is not easy to understand. This is more difficult for us and it may seem to have nothing to do with the condition of peace just described. However, it constitutes its truest, most authentic premise. Indeed, the peace the Lord offers us and guarantees us is not to be understood as the absence of worry, of disappointment, of failure, of reasons for suffering. If it were so, supposing we had managed to be at peace, that moment would end quickly, and we would inevitably fall prey to unease. Instead, the peace that springs from faith is a gift: it is the grace of feeling that God loves us and that he is always beside us; he does not leave us on our own even for a moment of our life. This, as the Apostle states, generates patience, because we know that, even at the hardest and most disturbing moment, the Lord's mercy and goodness are greater than everything, and nothing will tear us from his hands and from communion with him.

Here then is why Christian hope is steadfast; here is why *it does not disappoint*. Never does it disappoint. Hope does not disappoint! It is not based on what we can do or be, nor even on what we may believe in. Its foundation, that is, the foundation of Christian hope, is what we can be most faithful and certain of, that is to say, the love that God himself has for each of us. It is easy to say: God loves us. We all say it. But think a bit: each one of us is able to ask: am I sure that God loves me? It is not so easy to say it. But it is true. This is a good exercise, to say to oneself: God loves me. This is the root of our certainty, the root of hope. The Lord has abundantly poured into our hearts the Spirit — which is the love of God — as artisan, as guarantor, precisely so that he may nourish the faith within us and keep this hope alive. This is a certainty: God loves me. 'But in this difficult moment?' — God loves me. 'I, who have done this bad and cruel thing?' — God loves me. No one can take this certainty away. We must repeat it as a prayer: God loves me. I am sure that God loves me. I am sure that God loves me.

Now we can understand why the Apostle Paul exhorts us to always boast about all this. I boast of God's love because he loves me. The hope that we have been given never divides us from others, much less does it lead us to discredit or marginalize them. Instead it is an extraordinary

gift of which we are called to make ourselves 'channels', with humility and simplicity, for everyone. So our boastfulness is because we have as Father a God who is impartial, who does not exclude anyone, but who opens his house to all human beings, beginning with the least and the most distant, so that as his children we may learn to console and support one another. And never forget: hope does not disappoint.

In this hope we were saved (cf. Rom 8:19-27)

General audience of 22 February 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

We are often tempted to think that Creation is our property, a possession that we can exploit as we please, and for which we must account to no one. In the passage of the Letter to the Romans (8:19-27), a part of which we have just heard, the Apostle Paul reminds us that instead, Creation is a wondrous gift that God has placed in our hands, so that we may enter a relationship with him and we may recognize in it the imprint of his loving plan, the fulfillment of which calls us all to work together, day after day.

However, when a human being allows himself to succumb to selfishness, he ends up defacing even the most beautiful things that have been entrusted to him. And this has also happened with Creation. Let us think about water. Water is something beautiful and very important. Water gives us life; it helps us in everything, but, in order to exploit minerals, water is contaminated; Creation is sullied and Creation is destroyed. This is just one example. There are many others. With the tragic experience of sin, our broken communion with God, we have shattered the original communion with all that surrounds us and we have ended by corrupting Creation, thereby rendering it a slave, subjugated to our shortsightedness. Unfortunately the result of all this is dramatically before our eyes, every day. When communion with God is broken, man loses his original beauty and ends up disfiguring everything around him; and whereas before everything referred to the Father Creator and his infinite love, all is now marked by the sad and desolate sign of pride and of human greed. Human pride, in exploiting Creation, destroys.

The Lord, however, does not leave us on our own and even in this distressing context, he offers us a new prospect of freedom, of universal salvation. It is what Paul highlights joyfully, inviting us to listen to the groans of the whole of Creation. Indeed, if we pay attention, around us everything is groaning: Creation itself groans; we human beings groan and the Holy Spirit groans within us, in our heart. Now, these groans are not a barren, disconsolate lament, but — as the Apostle explains — they are the groaning of a woman in labour; they are the groans of those who suffer, but know that a new life is about to be born. And in our case, it is truly so. We are still gripped by the consequences of our sin and everything, around us, still bears the sign of our weariness, of our shortcomings, of our closure. At the same time, however, we know we have been saved by the Lord and that we have already been able to contemplate and to foretaste, in ourselves and in what surrounds us, the signs of the Resurrection, of Easter, which brings about a new Creation.

This is the content of our hope. The Christian does not live outside of the world; he knows how to recognize in his life and in what surrounds him the signs of evil, of selfishness and of sin. He is in solidarity with those who suffer, with those who weep, with those who are marginalized, with those who despair.... However, at the same time, the Christian has learned to read all of this with the eyes of Easter, with the eyes of the Risen Christ. Thus, he knows that we are living in the time of waiting, the time of longing which transcends the present, the time of fulfillment. In hope we know that the Lord wants to definitively heal with his mercy the wounded and humiliated hearts and all that man has spoiled by his impiety, and that in this way, He regenerates a new world and a new humanity, finally reconciling them in his love.

How often are we Christians tempted to give in to disappointment, to pessimism.... At times we allow ourselves to resort to pointless complaining, or we remain speechless and do not even know what to ask for, what to hope for.... Yet once more, however, the Holy Spirit — the breath of our hope, who keeps the groans and the expectation alive in our heart — comes to help us. The Spirit sees for us beyond the negative semblance of the present; he already reveals to us the new

heavens and the new earth that the Lord is preparing for mankind.

Lent, a path of hope

General audience of 1 March 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

On this day, Ash Wednesday, we enter the Liturgical Season of Lent. And because we are offering a series of catecheses on Christian hope, today I would like to present *Lent* to you as a *journey of hope*.

Indeed, this prospect is immediately evident if we consider that Lent was instituted in the Church as a time of preparation for Easter and that, therefore, the whole meaning of this 40-day period is *illuminated by the Paschal Mystery* toward which it is directed. We can imagine the Risen Lord who calls us to come out of our darkness, and so we set ourselves on the path toward the One who is Light. Lent is a journey toward the Risen Jesus; it is a period of repentance, also of mortification, not as an end in itself, but rather aimed at enabling ourselves to rise with Christ, to renew our baptismal identity, that is, to be born anew “of the spirit”, by the love of God (cf. Jn 3:3-6). This is why Lent is, by nature, a time of hope.

In order to better understand what this means, we must refer to the fundamental experience of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, recounted in the Bible in the Book which bears this name: *Exodus*. The point of departure was the condition of slavery in Egypt, oppression, forced labour. But the Lord has not forgotten his people and his promise: He calls Moses and, with a mighty arm, enables the Israelites to flee from Egypt and guides them through the desert toward the Land of Liberty. During this journey from slavery to freedom, the Lord gives the Law to the Israelites, to teach them to love Him, the One Lord, and to love each other as brothers. Scripture shows that the exodus is long and tormented: symbolically it lasts 40 years, which is the lifespan of a

generation. A generation which, faced by the trials of the journey, is always tempted to bemoan Egypt and turn back. We too all know the temptation to turn back, everyone. But the Lord remains faithful and that poor people, led by Moses, reaches the Promised Land. This entire journey is carried out *in hope*: the hope of reaching the Land, and precisely in this sense it is an “exodus”, a escape from slavery to freedom. These 40 days are also for all of us an release from slavery, from sin, to experience freedom, the encounter with the Risen Christ.

Each step, each effort, each trial, each failure and each new start, all have meaning only within the salvific plan of God, who wants for his people life and not death, joy and not pain.

The Paschal Mystery of Jesus is his exodus, by which He has opened the way for us to reach full, eternal and blessed life. To open this path, this passage, Jesus had to strip himself of his glory, humble himself, be obedient unto death and unto death on the cross. Opening the path to eternal life for us cost all his blood, and thanks to Him we are saved from the slavery of sin. But this does not mean to say that He has done everything and that we do not have to do anything, that He has passed through the cross and we “go to heaven in a carriage”. It is not like that. Our salvation is surely his gift, but as it is a love story, he asks for our ‘yes’ and our participation in his love, as Our Mother Mary shows us, and after her, all the Saints.

This is the dynamic of Lent: Christ precedes us with his exodus, and we cross the desert thanks to Him and behind Him. He is tempted for us, and has defeated the Tempter for us, but we too must face temptations with Him and overcome them. He gives us the living water of his Spirit, and it is up to us to draw from his font and drink, in the Sacraments, in prayer, in adoration; He is the light which conquers darkness, and we are asked to keep alight the little flame that was entrusted to us on the day of our Baptism.

In this sense, Lent is the “sacramental sign of our conversion” (cf. *Roman Missal*, Oration, Collect, First Sunday of Lent); those who make the Lenten journey are always on the path of conversion. Lent is the sacramental sign of our journey from slavery to freedom, always to be

renewed. It is certainly a demanding journey, as it rightly should be, because love is demanding, but it is a journey filled with hope. Indeed, I would add: the Lenten exodus is the journey in which hope itself is *formed*. The difficulty in crossing the desert — all the trials, temptations, illusions, mirages ... — all this serves to forge a solid, steadfast hope, on the model of that of the Virgin Mary, who, in the midst of the darkness of the Passion and death of her Son, continues to believe and to hope in his Resurrection, in the victory of God's love.

With hearts open to this horizon, today we enter the Season of Lent. Feeling that we are part of the holy People of God, let us joyfully begin this journey of hope.

Joyful in hope (cf. Rom 12:9-13)

General audience of 15 March 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

We know well that the great commandment the Lord Jesus left us is the one about love: to love God with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our mind, and to love our neighbour as ourselves (cf. Mt 22:37-39); namely, we are called to love, to exercise charity. And this is our loftiest vocation, our vocation *par excellence*; and it is also tied to the joy of Christian hope. One who loves has the joy of hope, of reaching the encounter with the great love that is the Lord.

The Apostle Paul, in the passage of the Letter to the Romans that we have just heard, puts us on guard: there is a risk that our charity may be hypocritical, that our love may be hypocritical. So we must ask: when does this hypocrisy happen? And how can we be certain that our love is sincere, that our charity is authentic? That we are not pretending to do charity or that our love is not for show: sincere, strong love....

Hypocrisy can insinuate itself anywhere, even *in our world of love*. This happens when our love is motivated by interest, by self-interest; and how much interested love there is ... when the service to charity, which we seem to carry out generously, is done in order to draw attention to ourselves or to feel good: ‘Oh, how good I am!’. No, this is hypocrisy! Or also when we aspire to things with “visibility” so as to put our intelligence or our abilities on display. Behind all this there is a false, misleading idea, thinking that since we love, we are good — as though charity were a manmade creation, a product of our heart. Charity, instead, is first and foremost *a grace*, a gift; being able to love is a gift of God, and we must ask for it. He gives it freely, if we ask for it. Charity is a grace: it does not consist in showing off, but in what the

Lord gives us and which we freely receive; and it cannot be extended to others if it is not first generated by the encounter with the meek and merciful face of Jesus.

Paul invites us to recognize that we are sinners, and also that our way of loving is marked by sin. At the same time, however, one becomes the bearer of *a new message, a message of hope*: the Lord opens before us a new path of freedom, a path of salvation. It is the opportunity for us too to live the great commandment of love, to become instruments of God's charity. And this happens when we let our heart be healed and renewed by the Risen Christ. The Risen Lord who lives among us, who lives with us is capable of healing our heart: He does so, if we ask it. It is He who allows us, even in our littleness and poverty, to experience the Father's compassion and to celebrate the wonders of his love. And thus we understand that all we can live and do for our brothers and sisters is but the response to what God has done and continues to do for us. Rather, it is God himself who, abiding in our heart and our life, continues to be close and to serve all those whom we encounter each day on our journey, beginning with the least and the neediest, in whom He is first recognized.

Thus, with these words, rather than reproach us, the Apostle Paul wants to *encourage us and rekindle hope in us*. Indeed, everyone has the experience of not living the commandment of love fully or as we should. But this too is a grace, because it makes us understand that we are incapable of truly loving by ourselves: we need the Lord constantly to renew this gift in our heart, through the experience of his infinite mercy. Then, indeed, we will return to appreciate small things, simple, ordinary things; we will once more appreciate all these little, everyday things and we will be capable of loving others as God loves them, wanting their good, that is, that they be holy, friends of God; and we will be glad of the opportunity to make ourselves close to those who are poor and humble, as Jesus does with each one of us when we are distant from Him, to stoop to the feet of our brothers and sisters, as He, the Good Samaritan, does with each of us, with his compassion and his forgiveness.

Dear brothers and sisters, what the Apostle Paul reminded us of is the secret for — I shall use his words — it is the secret for “*rejoicing in hope*” (cf. Rom 12:12); rejoicing in hope. The joy of hope: because we know that in all circumstances, even the most adverse, and also through our own failures, God’s love never fails.

Therefore, with his grace and his fidelity dwelling and abiding in our heart, let us live in the joyful hope of reciprocating in our brothers and sisters, through the little we can, the abundance we receive from Him each day. Thank you.

A hope based on the Word (cf. Rom 15:1-6)

General audience of 22 March 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

For some weeks now the Apostle Paul has been helping us to understand better what Christian hope consists of. And we have said that it was not optimism, that it was something else. And the Apostle helps us to understand this. Today he does so by aligning two attitudes that are more important than ever for our life and for our experience of faith: endurance and encouragement (vv. 4.5). In the passage from the Letter to the Romans that we have just heard, they are mentioned twice: first with reference to the Scriptures and then to God Himself. What is their deepest and truest meaning? And how do they shed light on the reality of hope? These two attitudes: endurance and encouragement.

We may define endurance also as patience: it is the capacity to sustain, to carry on our shoulders, to remain faithful, even when the burden seems to become too great and unbearable, and when we are tempted to judge negatively and abandon everything and everyone. Encouragement, instead, is the grace of knowing how to perceive and to show in every situation, even in those most marked by disappointment and suffering, the presence of God's compassionate action. Now, Saint Paul reminds us that endurance and encouragement are transmitted to us in a special way in the Scriptures (v. 4), that is, the Bible. Indeed, the Word of God, first of all, leads us to turn our gaze to Jesus, to know Him better and to conform to Him, to increasingly resemble Him. Secondly, the Word reveals to us that the Lord is truly the "God of endurance and encouragement" (v. 5), Who always remains faithful in His love for us; that is, He endures in His love with us, and He never

tires of loving us! He endures, He always loves us! And He takes care of us, tending to our wounds with the caress of His goodness and His mercy, that is, He consoles us. He never tires of encouraging us either.

From this perspective we can also understand the Apostle's initial affirmation: "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves" (v. 1). This expression, "we who are strong", may seem presumptuous, but in the logic of the Gospel we know that it is not so; or rather, that it is precisely the opposite, because our strength does not come from us, but from the Lord. He who experiences in his own life the faithful love of God and His encouragement is able, or rather, compelled stay close to his weaker brothers and to take on their frailty. If we stay close to the Lord, we will have the strength to be close to the weakest, those most in need, and to encourage and give strength to them. This is what it means. We can do this without complacency, instead simply aware of being a "channel" that transmits the gifts of the Lord; and in this one can truly become a "sower" of hope. This is what the Lord asks of us, with that strength and that capacity to console and to be sowers of hope. And nowadays we need to sow hope, but it is not easy...

The fruit of this style of life is not a community in whom some belong to an "A-list" made up of the strong, and others a "B-list", consisting of the weak. The fruit is, instead, as Saint Paul says, to "live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus" (v. 5). The Word of God nurtures a hope that translates in a concrete way into sharing, into mutual service. Because even those who are "strong" sooner or later find themselves experiencing fragility and being in need of the comfort of others; and vice versa, in weakness one can always offer a smile or a hand to a brother in difficulty. And it is a community that thereby "with one voice [glorifies] the God and Father" (cf. v.6). But all this is possible if we place Christ and His Word at the centre, because He is the strong one, it is He Who gives us strength, Who gives us patience, Who gives us hope, Who gives us encouragement. He is the "strong brother" Who takes care of each one of us: indeed, we all need to be lifted onto the shoulders of the Good Shepherd and to feel wrapped in His tender and thoughtful gaze.

Dear friends, we are never able to thank God enough for the gift of His Word, that He makes present in the Scriptures. It is there that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ reveals Himself as the “God of endurance and encouragement”. And it is there that we become aware of how our hope is founded not on our abilities and our strengths, but on God’s support and on the fidelity of His love, that is, on God's strength and consolation.

Hope against hope (cf. Rom 4:16-25)

General audience of 29 March 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

The passage from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans that we have just heard offers us a great gift. Although we are used to recognizing in Abraham our father in the faith; today the Apostle enables us to understand that Abraham is for us a *father in hope*; not only *father in faith*, but *father in hope*. And this is so because in his life story we are already able to perceive an announcement of the Resurrection, of the new life that conquers evil and death itself.

In the text, it states that Abraham believed in God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom 4:17); and then it explains: “He did not weaken in faith even when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead ... or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb” (v. 19). Indeed, this is the experience we too are called to live. The God who reveals himself to Abraham is the God who saves, the God who delivers from despair and from death, the God who calls into life. In the story of Abraham, everything becomes a hymn to the God who sets free and regenerates, everything becomes prophecy. It becomes so for us, because we now recognize and celebrate the fulfilment of all of this in the mystery of Easter. God in fact “raised from the dead Jesus” (v. 24), so that in Him we too might pass from death to life. Thus, truly, Abraham can be called the “father of many nations”, inasmuch as he shines as an announcement of a new humanity — us! — delivered by Christ from sin and from death, and introduced once and for all into God’s loving embrace.

At this point, Paul helps us to focus on the extremely close bond

between faith and hope. In fact, he states of Abraham that “in hope he believed against hope” (v. 18). Our hope is not based on rationale, foresight and human confidence; it appears where there is no longer hope, where there is no longer anything to hope in, just as happened to Abraham, facing his imminent death and the barrenness of his wife Sarah. The end was approaching for them; they could not have children, in that situation. Abraham believed and had hope against all hope. And this is great! Great hope is rooted in faith, and for this very reason it is able to transcend all hope. Yes, because it is not based upon our words, but on the Word of God. In this sense too then, we are called to follow the example of Abraham, who — despite all the evidence of a reality in which he seems bound to die — trusts in God, “fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised” (v. 21). I would like to ask you a question: Are we, all of us, convinced of this? Are we convinced that God loves us and that he is willing to bring to fulfilment all that he promised us? But Father, how much do we have to pay for this? There is a single price: “open your heart”. Open your hearts and this power of God will lead you forward; he will do miraculous things and will teach you what hope is. This is the single price: open your heart to faith, and he will do the rest.

This is the paradox, and at the same time the strongest element, our highest hope! A hope based on a promise that, from the human point of view, seems uncertain and unpredictable, but which never fails, not even in the face of death, when the One who promises is the God of the Resurrection and Life. Not just anyone promises this! The One who promises this is the God of the Resurrection and life.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, today we ask the Lord for the grace to remain grounded, not so much in our own certainties, our own abilities, but in the hope that springs from God’s promise, as true children of Abraham. When God promises, he brings to fulfilment what he has promised. He never fails to keep his word. Then our lives will take on a new light, in the awareness that the One who resurrected his Son, will also raise us and will truly make us one with Him, together with all our brothers and sisters in faith. We all believe. Today we are all in the Square; let us praise the Lord. We will sing the *Our Father*, then we will

receive the blessing.... But this passes. This too is a promise of hope. If today we have an open heart, I assure you that all of us will encounter, in the Square, the Heaven that never ends; it is forever. This is God's promise and this is our hope, if we open our hearts. Thank you.

Giving an account of the hope that is in us (cf 1 Pet 3:8-17)

General audience of 5 April 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Saint Peter's First Letter conveys extraordinary energy! One must read it once, twice, three times to understand this extraordinary energy: it manages to instil great solace and peace, conveying the sense that the Lord is always beside us and never abandons us, especially in the most delicate and difficult moments of our lives. But what is the "secret" of this Letter, and in particular, of the passage we have just heard? (cf. *1 Pt* 3:8-17). This is a question. I know that today you will take up the New Testament, you will look for Peter's first Letter and you will read it slowly, carefully, to understand the secret and the strength of this Letter. What is the secret of this Letter?

The secret is in the fact that this Letter is *rooted directly in Easter*, in the heart of the mystery that we are about to celebrate, thus letting us sense all the light and the joy arising from Christ's death and Resurrection. Christ has truly Risen, and this is a nice greeting to exchange on Easter: "Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen!", as many peoples do. Remembering that Jesus is Risen; he is alive among us; he is alive and lives in each of us. This is why Saint Peter firmly invites us to adore Him in our hearts (cf. v. 15). The Lord has dwelled there from the moment of our Baptism. And from there, he continues to renew us and our life, filling us anew with his love and the fullness of the Spirit. This is why the Apostle urges us to *account for the hope that is in us* (cf. v. 15). Our hope is not a concept; it is not an emotion, it is not a mobile phone, it is not an accumulation of riches! Our hope is a Person. It is the Lord Jesus whom we recognize as living and present in us and in

our brothers and sisters, because Christ is Risen. Instead of saying “good morning”, “good evening” when greeting each other during the Season of Easter, the Slavic people greet each other with “Christ is risen!”, “*Christos voskrese!*”; and they are happy to say it! And this is the “good morning” and the “good evening” they exchange: “Christ is Risen!”.

Thus, we understand that this hope must not so much be held to account at a theoretical level, in word alone, but above all, through bearing a witness of life, both within the Christian community and outside it. If Christ is alive and lives within us in our heart, then we must also allow him to make himself visible, not hide him, and [allow him] to work within us. This means that the Lord Jesus must increasingly become the example for us: a model for life, and that we must learn how to behave as he behaved; to do as Jesus did. The hope that dwells in us, therefore, cannot remain hidden within us, in our heart: it would be a feeble hope that lacks the courage to go out and be seen; but our hope, as shines forth in Psalm 33 as mentioned by Peter, must necessarily gush forth to the outside, taking on the exquisite and unmistakable form of kindness, respect and goodwill toward others, even reaching the point of forgiving those who hurt us. A person without hope is unable to forgive, is unable to give the solace of forgiveness and to *have* the solace of forgiveness. Yes, because this is what Jesus did, and continues to do through those who make room for him in their hearts and their lives, in the awareness that evil is not overcome with evil but rather with humility, mercy and meekness. Members of the Mafia believe that evil can be overcome with evil and so they take revenge and do many things that we all know about. But they do not know what humility, mercy and meekness are. Why? Because the *mafiosi* have no hope. Think about this.

This is why Saint Peter affirms: “it is better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God’s will, than for doing wrong”, (v. 17). This does not mean that it is good to suffer, but that, when we suffer for the sake of goodness, we are in communion with the Lord, who accepted suffering and being put on the Cross for our Salvation. Thus, when in the least or most important situations in our life, we accept suffering for the sake of

goodness, it is as if we were scattering around us seeds of the Resurrection and of life, shining the Light of Easter into the darkness. This is why the Apostle urges us to always respond with a “blessing” (cf. v. 9). A blessing is not a formality. It is not just a sign of courtesy. Rather, it is a great gift which we were the first to receive and that we have the opportunity to share with our brothers and sisters. This is the announcement of God’s love, an immeasurable love which does not end, which never fails and which constitutes the true foundation of our hope.

Dear friends, we also understand why the Apostle Peter calls us “blessed”, when we “suffer for righteousness’ sake” (v. 13). This is not just for moral or ascetic reasons. It is because each time we take the side of the least and of the marginalized, or do not respond to evil with evil, but rather with forgiveness, without vengeance, forgiving and blessing — each time we do this — we shine forth as living and bright signs of hope, thus becoming instruments of solace and of peace, according to God’s heart. Thus, let us go forth with kindness, meekness, being amiable and doing good, even to those who do not love us or who hurt us. Onward!

Hope of the world and hope in the Cross (cf. Jn 12:24-25)

General audience of 12 April 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

On Sunday we recalled Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, amid the festive acclamation of the disciples and the large crowd. Those people placed many hopes in Jesus: many expected him to work miracles and great signs, manifest power and even bring freedom from the occupying forces. Who among them could have imagined that within a short time, Jesus would have instead been humiliated, condemned and put to death on the Cross? Those people lost all earthly hope before the Cross. But we believe that precisely in the Crucifix our hope is reborn. Earthly hopes collapse before the Cross, but new hopes are born, those which last forever. The hope born of the Cross is different. It is a different hope from those that collapse, from those of the world. But which hope is it? Which hope is born of the Cross?

It may help us to understand what Jesus said right after he entered Jerusalem: *"unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit"* (Jn 12:24). Let us try to think of a grain or a small seed, that falls upon the soil. If it remains closed within itself, nothing happens; but if instead it splits open, it germinates and then gives life to an ear of wheat; it sprouts, then becomes a plant, and the plant will bear fruit.

Jesus brought new hope into the world and he did so in the manner of the seed: he became very small, like a grain of wheat; he left his heavenly glory in order to come among us: he "fell into the earth". But this still was not enough. In order to bear fruit, Jesus experienced love to the fullest, allowing himself to be split open by death as a seed lets

itself split open under the ground. Precisely there, at the lowest point of his abasement — which is also the loftiest point of love — *hope burgeoned*. Should one of you ask: “How is hope born?” — “From the Cross. Look to the Cross; look to Christ Crucified and from there you will receive the hope that never disappears, which lasts to eternal life”. Indeed, this hope sprouted from the very force of love: because the love that “hopes all things, endures all things (1 Cor 13:7), the love that is the life of God, has renewed everything that it touched. Thus, at Easter, Jesus transformed our sin into forgiveness, by taking it upon himself. But feel how truly the Paschal Mystery transforms: Jesus has transformed our sin into forgiveness; our death into resurrection, our fear into trust. This is why there, on the Cross, our hope is always born and born anew. This is why with Jesus, all our darkness can be transformed into light, every defeat into victory, every disappointment into hope. Every one: yes, every one. Hope overcomes all, because it is born of the love of Jesus who made himself as a grain of wheat that fell to the soil and died to give life, and hope comes from that life full of love.

When we choose the hope of Jesus, we gradually discover that the successful way of life is that of the seed, that of humble love. There is no other way to conquer evil and give hope to the world. But you might tell me: “No, it is a losing rationale!”. It might seem so, seem that it is a losing rationale, because those who love, lose power. Have you considered this? Those who love, lose power; those who give, impart something, and loving is a gift. In reality, the rationale of the seed that dies, of humble love, is God’s way, and only this bears fruit. We see it also in ourselves; possessing always spurs desire for something else: I have obtained something for myself and immediately I want another larger one, and so on, and I am never satisfied. That is a pernicious thirst! The more you have, the more you want. Those who are insatiable are never sated. Jesus says this in a clear way: “He who loves his life loses it” (Jn 12:25). You are insatiable, you seek to have many things but ... you will lose everything, even your life; that is: those who love *their own* and live for their own self-interest only swell with pride and lose. However those who accept, who are ready to serve, live in God’s

way: thus they are winners, they save themselves and others; they become *seeds of hope* for the world. But it is lovely to help others, to serve others.... Perhaps we will get tired! But that is the way life is, and the heart is filled with joy and hope. This is love and hope together: to serve and to give.

Of course, this true love passes through the Cross, sacrifice, as for Jesus. The Cross is the obligatory passage, but it is not the goal; it is a passage: the goal is glory, as Easter shows us. And here another lovely image comes to our aid: that Jesus gave his disciples during the Last Supper. He says: “When a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her hour has come; but when she is delivered of the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world (Jn 16:21). Thus: to give life, not to keep it. This is what mothers do: they give another life; they suffer, but then they rejoice, they are happy because they have given birth to another life. It gives joy; love gives birth to life and even gives meaning to pain. Love is the engine that empowers our hope. Let me repeat: love is the engine that empowers our hope. Let each one ask: “Do I love? Have I learned how to love? Do I learn each day to love more?”, given that love is the engine that empowers our hope.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in these days, days of love, let us allow ourselves to be enveloped by the mystery of Jesus who, as a kernel of wheat, gives us life by dying. He is the seed of our hope. Let us contemplate the Crucifix: source of hope. We will slowly understand that to hope with Jesus, is to learn to see, as of now, the plant in the seed, Easter in the Cross, life in death. Now, I would like to give you a task to do at home. It will be good for all of us to pause before the Crucifix — you all have one at home — to look at it and say to it: “With You, nothing is lost. With You, I can always hope. You are my hope”. Let us now imagine the Crucifix and let us all together say three times to the [image] of Jesus Crucified: “You are my hope”. Everyone: “You are my hope”. Louder! “You are my hope”. Thank you.

The Risen Christ, our hope (cf. 1 Cor 15)

General audience of 19 April 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

We are meeting today in the light of Easter which we have celebrated and we are continuing to celebrate in the Liturgy. For this reason, in our series of catecheses on Christian hope, I would like to speak to you today about the Risen Christ, our hope, as he is portrayed by Saint Paul in the First Letter to the Corinthians. (cf. 1 Cor 15).

The Apostle wants to solve a problem which was surely at the centre of discussions in the community of Corinth. The Resurrection is the last topic discussed in the Letter, but it is probably the first in order of importance. In fact, everything rests on this premise.

Speaking to his fellow Christians, Paul begins with an irrefutable fact that is not the result of the reflection of a knowledgeable man, but a fact, a simple fact which occurred in the lives of some people. Christianity started from here. It is not an ideology; it is not a philosophical system; rather it is a path of faith which begins with an event witnessed by Jesus' first disciples. Paul summarises it like this: Jesus died for our sins, he was buried, and on the third day He rose and appeared to Peter and to the twelve [apostles]. (cf. 1 Cor 15:3-5). This is the fact: He died, He was buried, He rose and He appeared. That is, Jesus is alive! This is the heart of the Christian message.

In announcing this event, which is the central nucleus of faith, Paul insists, above all, on the last element of the Easter mystery, that is, on the fact that Jesus is Risen. If in fact everything had ended with his death, we would have in Him, an example of supreme self-denial, but this would not be able to generate our faith. He was a hero! He died, but He is Risen because faith arises from the Resurrection. Accepting that

Christ is dead and that He died crucified is not an act of faith. It is a historical fact. Believing he is Risen, on the other hand, is. Our faith begins on Easter morning. Paul makes a list of the people to whom the Risen Jesus appeared (cf. vv. 6-7). We have here a short summary of all the Easter narratives and of all the people who came into contact with the Risen One. At the top of the list are: Cephas, that is Peter, the group of 12 [Apostles] and then “500 brethren” many of whom could still have borne witness. Then James is cited. The last on the list — as the least worthy of all — is himself. Paul says of himself: “as to one untimely born” (v 8).

Paul uses this expression because his personal history is dramatic. He was not an altar boy, but a persecutor of the Church, proud of his convictions. He felt he was a successful man with a very clear idea of what life was about and its duties. But, in this perfect picture, — everything was perfect for Paul, he knew everything — in this perfect view of life, one day something absolutely unexpected happens: the meeting with the Risen Jesus on the way to Damascus. There was not just a man who fell to the ground. There was a person seized by an event that would overturn the meaning of [his life]. And the persecutor becomes an apostle. Why? Because I saw Jesus alive! I saw the Risen Jesus Christ! This is the foundation of Paul’s faith, as well as of the faith of the other apostles, as well as the faith of the Church, as well as of our faith.

How beautiful it is to think that Christianity is essentially this! It is not so much our search for God — a search which in truth is tenuous —, but rather God’s search for us. Jesus took us, grasped us, won us over, never more to leave us. Christianity is grace. It is surprise and, for this reason, it implies a heart that is capable of amazement. A closed heart, a rationalist heart is incapable of amazement and cannot understand what Christianity is because Christianity is grace, and grace can only be perceived, and furthermore, it happens in the amazement of the encounter.

So, even if we are sinners — we all are —, if our good intentions are only “on paper”, or if on appraising our life we realize we have

accumulated many failures..., on Easter morning, we can be like those people of whom the Gospel speaks: going to the Sepulchre of Christ, seeing the large overturned stone and thinking that God is preparing an unexpected future for them and for all of us; going to our sepulchre: we all have some of this inside us. To go there and see how God is capable of rising again from there. Here, there is happiness; there is joy and life, where everyone thought there was only sadness, defeat and darkness. God makes His most beautiful flowers grow in the midst of the most arid of stones.

To be Christian means not starting from death, but rather, from God's love for us which has defeated our most bitter enemy. God is greater than nothingness, and a lit candle is enough to overcome the darkest of nights. Echoing the prophets, Paul cries, "O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?"(v. 55). We carry this cry in our heart in these days of Easter. And if they should ask the reason for the smile we give and our patient readiness to share, then we will be able to answer that Jesus is still here, that he continues to be alive among us, that Jesus is here, in the Square, with us: Alive and Risen.

**“I am with you always, to the end of the world”
(Mt 28:20): the promise that gives hope**

General audience of 26 April 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

“I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28:20). These final words of the Gospel of Matthew recall the prophetic announcement that we find at the beginning: “his name shall be called Emmanuel’ (which means, God with us)” (Mt 1:23; cf. Is 7:14). God will be with us, every day, until the end of time. Jesus will walk with us, every day, until the end of time. The entire Gospel is enclosed within these two passages, words which communicate the mystery of a God whose name, whose identity is *to be with*. He is not an isolated God; he is a ‘God-with’. In particular, *with us*, namely, with human beings. Our God is not an absent God, confined to a far-off heaven; he is instead a God “impassioned” with man, so tenderly in love as to be incapable of being separated from him. We humans are experts at severing bonds and bridges. He, however, is not. If our heart cools, his remains ever incandescent. Our God accompanies us always, even if by mishap we should forget him. On the ridge that divides scepticism from faith, the discovery that we are loved and accompanied by our Father, that he never leaves us on our own, is decisive.

Our existence is *a pilgrimage, a journey*. Even those who are inspired by simply human hope, perceive the allure of the horizon, which urges them to explore worlds they do not yet know. Our spirit is *a migrant spirit*. The Bible is filled with stories of pilgrims and travellers. Abraham’s vocation begins with this command: “Go from your country” (Gen 21:1). The patriarch left that piece of the world he knew well and which was one of the cradles of civilization of his time.

Everything conspired against the wisdom of that journey. Yet Abraham set out. We do not become mature men and women if we do not perceive the allure of the horizon: that boundary between earth and sky which demands to be reached by a people that walks.

On his earthly journey man is never alone. Above all, a Christian never feels abandoned, because Jesus assures us that he does not await us only at the end of our long journey, but accompanies us in each of our days.

How long will God's care for mankind endure? How long will the Lord Jesus, who walks with us, how long will he care for us? The Gospel response leaves no room for doubt: *to the close of the age!* The sky will wane; the earth will wane; human hope will be erased, but the Word of God is greater than all and will never wane. And he will be the God with us, the God Jesus who walks with us. There will never be a day in our life in which we cease to be a concern for the heart of God. But one could ask: "But what are you saying?". I am saying this: there will never be a day in our life in which we cease to be a concern for the heart of God. He is always concerned about us, and he walks with us. And why does he do this? Simply because he loves us. Is this understood? He loves us! And God will surely provide for all our needs; he will not abandon us in times of trial and darkness. This certainty seeks to settle in our soul so as never to be extinguished. Some call this certainty "Providence". That is, God's closeness, God's love, God's walking with us is also called the "Providence of God": He provides for our life.

It is no coincidence that among the symbols of Christian hope there is one that I really like: *the anchor*. It expresses the notion that our hope is not vague; it is not to be confused with the uncertain sentiment of those who wish to improve the things of this world in an unrealistic way, relying only on their own willpower. Indeed, Christian hope is rooted not in the allure of the future, but in the *certainty of what God has promised us and accomplished in Jesus Christ*. If he guaranteed he would never abandon us, if every vocation begins with a "Follow me", with which he assures us he is always before us, why should we be afraid? With this promise, Christians can walk everywhere. Even

passing through parts of the wounded world, where things are not going well, we are among those who still continue to hope. The Psalm says: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me” (23[22]:4). It is precisely where darkness is rife that a light must be kept burning. Let us return to the anchor. Our faith is the anchor in heaven. We have anchored our life in heaven. What do we have to do? Hold fast to the rope: it is always there. And we go forward because we are certain that our life has an anchor in heaven, on that shore where we will arrive.

Of course, if we trusted only in our strengths, we would have reason to feel disappointed and defeated, because the world often shows itself immune to the laws of love. It prefers, so often, the laws of selfishness. But if the certainty survives in us that God does not abandon us, that God loves

us and this world tenderly, then it immediately changes our perspective. “*Homo viator, spe erectus*”, the ancients used to say. Along the journey, Jesus’ promise “I am with you” enables us to stand with hope, upright, trusting that the good God is already at work, accomplishing what humanly seems impossible, because the anchor is on heaven’s shore.

The holy, faithful People of God are a people that stand — *homo viator* — and walk, but upright, *erectus*, and they walk in hope. And wherever they go, they know that God’s love has preceded them: there is no part of the world that escapes the victory of the Risen Christ. And what is the victory of the Risen Christ? The victory of love. Thank you.

Mother of hope

General audience of 10 May 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

In our series of catecheses on Christian hope, today we look to Mary, Mother of Hope. Mary experienced more than one night on her journey as mother. Since her first appearance in the narrative of the Gospels, her figure stands out as if she were a character in a drama. It was not easy to respond with a 'yes' to the Angel's invitation: yet she, a woman in the flower of her youth, responds with courage, despite knowing nothing of the fate that awaits her. In that instant Mary appears to us as one of the many mothers of our world, courageous to the extreme when it comes to welcoming, in one's own womb, the history of a new man to be born.

That 'yes' is the first step in a long list of examples of obedience — a long list of examples! — that will accompany her journey as mother. Thus, Mary appears in the Gospels as a silent woman, who often does not understand all that is happening around her, but who contemplates each word and each event in her heart.

In this disposition there is a beautiful sample of Mary's psychology: she is not a woman who is depressed by the uncertainties of life, especially when nothing seems to be going the right way. Nor is she a woman who protests violently, who curses life's fate, which often shows us a hostile face. She is instead a woman who listens: do not forget that there is always a great connection between hope and listening, and Mary is a woman who listens. Mary welcomes life as it is conveyed to us, with its happy days, but also with its tragedies that we would rather not have met. Until Mary's supreme night, when her Son is nailed to the wood of the cross.

Until that day, Mary had nearly disappeared from the Gospel accounts: the sacred writers suggest this slow eclipsing of her presence, her remaining silent before the mystery of a Son who obeys the Father. However, Mary reappears precisely at the crucial moment: when a large number of friends disperse out of fear. Mothers do not abandon, and in that instant at the foot of the Cross, none of us could say which was the cruellest passion: be it that of an innocent man who dies on the gallows of the Cross, or the agony of a mother who accompanies the final moments of her son's life.

The Gospels are laconic, and extremely discrete. They record Mary's presence with a simple verb: she was "standing by" (Jn 19:25). She stood by. They say nothing of her reaction: whether she wept, whether she did not weep ... nothing; not so much as a brushstroke to describe her anguish: these details would be tackled later by the imagination of poets and painters offering us images that have entered the history of art and literature. But the Gospels only say: she was "standing by". She stood there, at the worst moment, at the cruellest moment, and she suffered with her son. She "stood by".

Mary "stood by"; she was simply there. Here again the young woman of Nazareth, hair now grayed with the passage of time, still struggling with a God who must only be embraced, and with a life that has come to the threshold of the darkest night. Mary "stood by" in the thickest darkness, but she "stood by". She did not go away. Mary is there, faithfully present, each time a candle must be held aflame in a place of fog and haze. She does not even know the future resurrection her Son was opening at that instant for us, for all of mankind: she stands there out of faithfulness to the plan of God whose handmaid she proclaimed herself to be on the first day of her vocation, but also due to her instinct as mother who simply suffers, each time there is a child who undergoes suffering. The suffering of mothers: we have all known strong women who have faced their children's suffering!

We will find her again on the first day of the Church; she, *mother of hope*, in the midst of that community of such fragile disciples: one had denied, many had fled, all had been afraid (cf. Acts 1:14). She simply

stood by, in the most natural of ways, as if it were something completely normal: in the first Church enveloped in the light of the Resurrection, but also in the trepidation of the first steps that had to be taken in the world.

For this reason we all love her as Mother. We are not orphans: we have a Mother in heaven who is the Holy Mother of God. Because she teaches us the virtue of waiting, even when everything seems to lack meaning: she is ever confident in the mystery of God, even when he seems to have eclipsed himself due to the evil of the world. In the most difficult moments, may Mary, the Mother that Jesus gave to all of us, always support our steps, may she always say to our hearts: “Arise! Look forward, look to the horizon”, because she is the Mother of Hope.

Thank you!

Mary Magdalene, apostle of hope

General audience of 17 May 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

In the last few weeks, our reflection has been moving, so to speak, within the orbit of the Paschal Mystery. Today we meet the one who, according to the Gospels, was the first to see the Risen Christ: Mary Magdalene. The Sabbath had ended not long before. On the day of the Passion, there had not been enough time to complete the funeral rites. For this reason, at that sorrow-filled dawn, the women went to Jesus' tomb with aromatic oils. The first to arrive was Mary Magdalene. She was one of the disciples who had accompanied Jesus from Galilee, putting herself at the service of the burgeoning Church. Her walk to the sepulchre mirrors the fidelity of many women who spend years in the small alleyways of cemeteries remembering someone who is no longer there. The most authentic bonds are not broken even in death: there are those who continue loving even if their loved one is gone forever.

The Gospel describes Magdalene by immediately highlighting that she was not a woman easily given to enthusiasm (cf. Jn 20:1-2, 11-18). In fact, after her visit to the sepulchre, she returns disappointed to the Apostles' hiding place. She tells them that the stone has been removed from the entrance to the sepulchre, and her first hypothesis is the simplest that one could formulate: someone must have stolen Jesus' body. Thus, the first announcement that Mary makes is not the one of the Resurrection, but of a theft perpetrated by persons unknown while all Jerusalem slept.

The Gospels then tell of Magdalene's second visit to Jesus' sepulchre. She was stubborn! She went, she returned ... because she was not convinced! This time her step is slow and very heavy. Mary suffers twice

as much: first for the death of Jesus, and then for the inexplicable disappearance of his body.

It is as she is stooping near the tomb, her eyes filled with tears, that God surprises her in the most unexpected way. John the Evangelist stresses how persistent her blindness is. She does not notice the presence of the two angels who question her, and she does not become suspicious even when she sees the man behind her, whom she believes is the custodian of the garden. Instead, she discovers the most overwhelming event in the history of mankind when she is finally called by her name: “Mary!” (v. 16).

How nice it is to think that the first apparition of the Risen One — according to the Gospels — took place in such a personal way! To think that there is someone who knows us, who sees our suffering and disappointment, who is moved with us and calls us by name. It is a law which we find engraved on many pages of the Gospel. There are many people around Jesus who search for God, but the most prodigious reality is that, long before that, in the first place there is God, who is concerned about our life, who wants to raise it, and to do this, he calls us by name, recognizing the individual face of each person. Each person is a love story that God writes on this earth. Each one of us is God’s love story. He calls each of us by our name: he knows us by name; he looks at us; he waits for us; he forgives us; he is patient with us. Is this true or not true? Each of us experiences this.

And Jesus calls her: “Mary!”: the revolution of her life, the revolution destined to transform the life of every man and every woman begins with a name which echoes in the garden of the empty sepulchre. The Gospels describe Mary’s happiness. Jesus’ Resurrection is not a joy which is measured with a dropper, but a waterfall that cascades over life. Christian life is not woven of soft joys, but of waves which engulf everything. You too, try to imagine, right now, with the baggage of disappointments and failures that each of us carries in our heart, that there is a God close to us who calls us by name and says to us: ‘Rise, stop weeping, for I have come to free you!’. This is beautiful.

Jesus is not one who adapts to the world, tolerating in it the

persistence of death, sadness, hatred, the moral destruction of people.... Our God is not inert, but our God — allow me to say — is a dreamer: he dreams of the transformation of the world, and accomplished it in the mystery of the Resurrection.

Mary would like to embrace her Lord, but he is already oriented towards the heavenly Father, whereas she is sent to carry the news to the brethren. And so that woman, who, before encountering Jesus, had been at the mercy of evil (cf. Lk 8:2) now becomes the *Apostle of the new and greatest hope*. May her intercession also help us live this experience: in times of woe and in times of abandonment, to listen to the Risen Jesus who calls us by name and, with a heart full of joy, to go forth and proclaim: “I have seen the Lord!” (v. 18). I have changed my life because I have seen the Lord! I am now different than before. I am another person. I have changed because I have seen the Lord. This is our strength and this is our hope. Thank you.

Emmaus, a way of hope

General audience of 24 May 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today, I would like to reflect on the experience of the two disciples of Emmaus, narrated in the Gospel of Luke (cf. 24:13-25). Let us imagine the scene: two men are walking; disappointed, sad, convinced that they are leaving behind them the bitterness of an event which ended badly. Before that Easter, they had been full of enthusiasm, convinced that those days would be decisive: their expectations met as well as the hopes of all the people. Jesus, to whom they had entrusted their lives, had seemed to arrive at the final battle. He would now manifest his power, after a long period of preparation and concealment. This is what they were expecting. And it was not to be.

The two pilgrims had been nurturing a uniquely human hope which was now falling to pieces. That Cross raised on Calvary was the most eloquent sign of a defeat which they had not foreseen. If that Jesus was truly in accordance with God's heart, then they had to conclude that God was unarmed, defenceless in the hands of violent people, unable to offer any resistance to evil.

So on that Sunday morning, these two men flee from Jerusalem. They still envision the events of the Passion, the death of Jesus unfold, and their souls bear the painful torment of those events during Saturday's forced repose. That Easter, which should have inspired a song of liberation, has instead transformed into the most painful day of their lives. They leave Jerusalem to go elsewhere, to a tranquil village. They look like people who are intent on removing a burning memory. They are thus on the road, walking in sadness. This scenario — the road — had already been important in the Gospel narratives. It will now

become increasingly more important, at the moment in which the history of the Church begins to be told.

Jesus' encounter with those two disciples appears to be completely fortuitous. It seems to be one of those chance meetings that happen in life. The two disciples are walking, deep in thought, and a stranger comes up alongside them. It is Jesus, but their eyes are not able to recognize him. And therefore, Jesus begins his "therapy of hope". What takes place on this road is a therapy of hope. Who administers it? Jesus.

Firstly, He asks and listens. Our God is not an intrusive God. Even though he knows the reason for the disappointment of those two men, he gives them time to be able to deeply fathom the bitterness which has overcome them. Out of this comes a confession that is a refrain in human existence. "*We had hoped, but... We had hoped, but...*" (v. 21). How much sadness, how many defeats, how many failures there are in the lives of every person! Deep down, we are all a little like those two disciples. How many times we have hoped in our lives. How many times we have felt like we were one step away from happiness only to find ourselves knocked to the ground, disappointed. But, Jesus walks with all people who, discouraged, walk with their heads hung low. And walking with them in a discrete manner, he is able to restore hope.

Jesus speaks to them, above all through *the Scriptures*. Those who take up God's Book will not encounter easy heroism, fierce campaigns of conquest. True hope never comes cheaply. It always undergoes defeat. The hope of those who do not suffer is perhaps not even [hope]. God does not like to be loved as one would love a ruler who leads his people to victory, annihilating his enemies in a bloodbath. Our God is a faint light burning on a cold and windy day, and as fragile as his presence in this world may appear, he has chosen the place that we all disdain.

Jesus then repeats for the disciples the fundamental gesture of every Eucharist. He takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it. Does not Jesus' entire history perhaps lie in this series of gestures? And is there not in every Eucharist, also the symbol of what the Church should be? Jesus takes us, blesses us, "breaks" our life — because there is no love

without sacrifice — and offers it to others; he offers it to everyone.

Jesus' encounter with the two disciples of Emmaus is a fleeting one. But the entire destiny of the Church is contained within it. It tells us that the Christian community is not enclosed within a fortified citadel, but rather journeys along its most essential environment, which is the road. And there, it encounters people with their hopes and disappointments, burdensome at times. The Church listens to everyone's stories as they emerge from the treasure chest of personal conscience, in order to then offer the Word of Life, the witness of love, a love that is faithful until the end. And thus, the hearts of people reignite with hope.

We have all had difficult moments in life, dark moments in which we walked in sadness, pensive, without horizons, with only a wall before us. And Jesus is always beside us to give us hope, to warm our hearts and to say: "Go ahead, I am with you. Go ahead". The secret of the road that leads to Emmaus is simply this: despite appearances to the contrary, we continue to be loved and God will never stop loving us. God will walk with us always, always, even in the most painful moments, even in the worst moments, even in moments of defeat. That is where the Lord is. And this is our hope. Let us go forward with this hope! Because he is beside us and walks with us. Always!

The Holy Spirit gives us an abundance of hope

General audience of 31 May 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

In the imminence of the Solemnity of Pentecost we cannot but speak of the relationship there is between Christian hope and the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the wind that propels us forward, which supports us on our journey, makes us feel as pilgrims and sojourners, and does not allow us to sit back and become a “sedentary” people.

The Letter to the Hebrews compares hope to an anchor (cf. 6:18-19); and we can add to this image that of a sail. If the anchor is what gives the boat its stability and keeps it “anchored” amid the undulations of the sea, the sail is instead what makes it move and advance on the waters. Hope is truly like a sail; it gathers the wind of the Holy Spirit and transforms it into a driving force that propels the boat, as the case may be, out to sea or to the shore.

The Apostle Paul concludes his Letter to the Romans with this hope: Pay attention; listen carefully. What a beautiful wish: “*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope*” (15:13). Let us reflect a while on the meaning of this beautiful message.

The expression “God of hope” does not mean only that God is the object of our hope, that is, he whom we hope to reach one day in eternal life; it also means that God is the One who already makes us hope, rather, makes us “rejoice in hope” (Rom 12:12): joyful now to hope, and not only hoping to rejoice. It is the joy of hoping and not of hoping to have joy, already today. A popular adage says: “as long as there is life, there is hope”; and the opposite is also true: as long as there is hope, there is life. Mankind needs hope in order to live and needs the Holy

Spirit in order to hope.

Saint Paul — we have heard — attributes to the Holy Spirit the capacity to make us actually “*abound in hope*”. To abound in hope means to never be discouraged; it means to hope “against all hope” (cf. Rom 4:18), that is, to hope even when there is no human reason to hope, as it was for Abraham when God asked him to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, and as it was, even more so, for the Virgin Mary at the foot of Jesus’ Cross.

The Holy Spirit makes this invincible hope possible, giving us the interior witness that we are children of God and his heirs (cf. Rom 8:16). How could the One who gave us his Only Son not give us all things along with him? (cf. Rom 8:32). “Hope” — brothers and sisters — “does not disappoint us. Hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:5). Therefore, it does not disappoint us because the Holy Spirit is within us urging us to move forward, always! This is why hope does not disappoint us.

There is more: the Holy Spirit does not only enable us to hope, but also to be *sowers of hope*, to be, we too — like him and thanks to him — “*paracletes*”, that is, comforters and protectors of our brethren, sowers of hope. A Christian might sow bitterness, might sow doubt, and this is not Christian, and whoever does this is not a good Christian. Sow hope: sow the oil of hope, sow the perfume of hope and not the vinegar of bitterness and of hopelessness. Blessed Cardinal Newman, in an address, said to the faithful: “Taught by our own pain, our own sorrow, nay, by our own sin, we shall have hearts and minds exercised for every service of love towards those who need it. We shall in our measure be comforters after the image of the Almighty Paraclete, — that is of the Holy Spirit — and that in all senses of the word, — advocates, assistants, soothing aids. Our words and advice, our very manner, voice, and look, will be gentle and tranquillizing” (*Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. v, London 1870, p. 309). It is above all the poor, the excluded, the unloved who need someone who becomes a “paraclete” for them, that is, comforter and protector, as the Holy Spirit does for each of us, who are

here in the Square, comforter and protector. We must do the same for the most needy, for the rejected, for those who are in most need, those who suffer the most. Protectors and comforters!

The Holy Spirit fosters hope not only in the heart of mankind, but also *in the whole of creation*. The Apostle Paul says — this sounds somewhat curious, but it is true — that creation, too, “waits with eager longing” to be set free, and it “groans and suffers” as in the travail of childbirth (cf. Rom 8:20-22). “The energy capable of moving the world is not an anonymous and blind force but the action of the ‘Spirit of God ... moving over the face of the waters’ (Gen 1:2) at the beginning of the Creation” (Benedict XVI, Homily, 31 May 2009). This too urges us to respect creation: one cannot deface a painting without offending the artist who created it.

Brothers and Sisters, may the forthcoming Feast of Pentecost — which is the birthday of the Church — find us concordant in prayer, with Mary, Jesus’ Mother and our own. And may the gift of the Holy Spirit make us abound in hope. I will tell you something more: may he enable us to lavish hope on all those who are neediest, the marginalized and all those in need. Thank You.

The paternity of God, source of our hope

General audience of 7 June 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

There was something fascinating about the prayer of Jesus, so fascinating that one day his disciples asked to be taught it. This event can be found in the Gospel of Luke, who among the Evangelists, was the one who best documented the mystery of Christ ‘praying’: the Lord prayed. Jesus’ disciples are struck by the fact that, particularly in the mornings and in the evenings, he retired in solitude and “immersed” himself in prayer: And because of this, one day, they asked him to teach them how to pray too (cf. Lk 11:1).

It is then that Jesus transmits what has become the Christian prayer *par excellence*: the *Our Father*. To tell the truth, Luke, with respect to Matthew, gives Jesus’ prayer back to us in a slightly abbreviated form that begins with the simple invocation: “*Father*” (v. 2).

The entire mystery of Christian prayer is summed up here, in these words: to have the courage to call God by the name ‘Father’. The Liturgy also confirms this when, inviting us to recite the Lord’s Prayer as a community, it uses the expression “let us dare to say”.

In fact, calling God by the name ‘Father’ is by no means something to be taken for granted. We would be inclined to use much loftier titles, which to us seem more respectful of his transcendence. Instead, invoking him as ‘Father’ puts us on a familiar plane with him, as a child turns to his father, knowing that he is loved and looked after by him. This is the great revolution that Christianity impresses on the religious psychology of mankind. The mystery of God, which always fascinates us and makes us feel small, does not however, scare us; it does not crush us, it does not distress us. This is a difficult revolution to welcome in

our human soul, so much so that even the accounts of the Resurrection say that, after seeing the empty tomb and the angel, the women “fled ... for trembling and astonishment had come upon them” (Mk 16:8). But Jesus tells us that God is a good Father and he tells us: “Do not be afraid!”.

Let us think about the parable of the merciful father (cf. Lk 15:11-32). Jesus tells us about a father who can be only love for his sons. A father who does not punish his son for his arrogance and who is even capable of entrusting him with his half of the inheritance and allowing him to leave home. God is Father, Jesus says, but not in the human way because there is no father in this world who would behave as the protagonist of this parable. God is Father in his own way: kind, defenceless before man’s freedom of choice, able only to conjugate the verb ‘to love’. When the rebellious son, after squandering everything, finally returns to the home of his birth, the father does not impose criteria of human justice, but rather he first feels the need to forgive, and with his embrace he conveys to his son that in all that long period of absence, he had missed him, his fatherly love had painfully missed him.

What an unfathomable mystery is a God who nurtures this type of love towards his children!

It is perhaps for this reason that, in evoking the core of the Christian mystery, the Apostle Paul does not feel up to translating into Greek an Aramaic word which Jesus pronounced as “*Abba*”. Twice in his Epistles Saint Paul uses this term, and he does not translate it either time, leaving it as it came from Jesus’ lips: “*Abba*”, a term which is even more intimate than “father”, and which some translate as “Dad, Papa”.

Dear brothers and sisters, we are never alone. We can be far away, hostile; we can even profess that we are “without God”. The Gospel of Jesus Christ however, reveals to us that God cannot be without us: He will never be a God “without man”. It is he who cannot be without us, and this is the great mystery! God cannot be God without man: this is a great mystery! And this certainty is the *source of our hope*, which we find safeguarded in our every invocation of the *Our Father*. When we

need help, Jesus does not tell us to resign ourselves and close ourselves off, but rather to turn to the Father and ask him with confidence. All our needs, from the most evident, daily ones such as food, health, work, to those of forgiveness and support against temptations, are not the reflection of our solitude. There is, instead, a Father who always looks at us with love and who certainly does not abandon us.

And now I have a proposal for you: each one of us has many problems and many needs. Let us reflect a bit, in silence, about these problems and these needs. Let us also think about the Father, our Father who cannot be without us, and who, at this moment, is looking at us. And all together let us pray with confidence and with hope: “Our Father, who art in Heaven...”. Thank you!

Beloved children, certain in hope

General audience of 14 June 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today we are holding the audience in two places, but we are connected by jumbo screens: the sick are in the Paul vi Hall so that they do not suffer the heat so much, and we are here. But we are still all together and we are connected by the Holy Spirit, who always creates unity. Let us greet those who are in the Hall!

None of us can live without love. And a bad form of slavery to which we can all fall victim is that of thinking that love must be earned. Perhaps a good part of contemporary man's anguish comes from this: believing that, if we are not strong, attractive and beautiful, no one will take care of us. Many people nowadays seek visibility only to fill an interior void, as though we were always in need of approval. However, can you imagine a world in which everyone is looking for ways to attract the attention of others, and in which no one is instead willing to *freely give love to another person*? Imagine a world like this: a world without freely given love! It appears to be a human world but in reality it is hellish. Much of mankind's narcissism conceals a feeling of loneliness and orphanhood. Behind many forms of behaviour that seem to be unexplainable there lies a question: is it possible that I do not deserve to be called by name, that is, to be loved? Because love always calls [us] by name....

When an adolescent is not loved or does not feel loved, this can lead to violence. Behind many forms of social hatred and "hooliganism", there is very often a heart which has not been given due recognition. There are no bad children just as there are no adolescents who are entirely evil, but *unhappy* people do exist. And what can make us feel

happy if not the experience of giving and receiving love? The life of human beings is an exchange of *glances*: someone who, by looking at us, steals a first *smile*. Thus, we who smile freely at those who are locked up in sadness, open a way out for them: an exchange of glances, looking people in the eye will open the doors of hearts.

The *first step* that God takes towards us is that of a love that anticipates and is unconditional. God is the first to love. God does not love because there is something in us that engenders love. God loves us because he himself *is love*, and, by its very nature, love tends to spread and give itself. God does not even condition his benevolence on our conversion. If anything, this is a consequence of God's love. Saint Paul expresses this perfectly: "God shows his love for us in that *while we were yet sinners* Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). *While we were yet sinners*. An unconditional love. We were "distant", as was the prodigal son in the parable: "while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion ..." (Lk 15:20). Out of love for us, God undertook an exodus from himself, to come and find us in this wasteland where it made no sense for him to pass. God loved us even when we were wrong.

Who among us loves in this way, if not a father or a mother? A mother continues to love her son even if he is in prison. I remember [seeing] many mothers queuing up to enter prison, in my previous diocese. And they were not ashamed. Their son was in jail, but he was *their* son. And they suffered many humiliations during searches before being allowed to enter but: "He is *my* son!" — "But, madam, your son is a delinquent!" — "He is my son!". Only this love from a mother or a father helps us to understand how God's love is. A mother does not ask for human justice to be rescinded, because each mistake demands atonement. But a mother never stops suffering for her own child. She loves the child even though a sinner. God does the same with us: *we are his beloved children!* But is it possible that God has some children whom he does not love? No. We are all God's beloved children. There is no curse on our life, but just a benevolent word from God, who drew us into life from nothing. The truth of everything is that *relationship of love* which links the Father to the Son through the Holy Spirit, a relationship into which we are welcomed thanks to grace. In him, in

Jesus Christ, we were all wanted, loved, desired. There is Someone who has impressed within us a primordial beauty, which no sin, no bad choice can ever completely erase. In the eyes of God, we are always small fountains made to gush forth good water. Jesus says to the Samaritan woman: “the water that I shall give [you] will become in [you] a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14).

What medicine is needed in order to change the heart of an unhappy person? What medicine can change the heart of a person who is not happy? [they reply: “love!”] Louder! [they shout: “love!”] Good! Very good, well done everyone! And how do we make the person feel that we love them? We must first embrace them. Make them feel wanted, which is important, and they will stop being sad. *Love calls for love* in a stronger way than hatred calls for death. Jesus did not die and rise for himself, but for us, so that our sins might be forgiven. It is therefore the time of resurrection of all: time to raise the poor once again from their discouragement, in particular those who have been lying in the sepulchre for much longer than three days. A wind of liberation blows here on our faces. Here, the gift of hope is sprouting up. And the hope is that of God the Father who loves us as we are: he loves us all and always. Thank you!

The saints are witnesses and companions in hope

General audience of 21 June 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

On the day of Baptism the invocation of the saints echoed around us. Many of us were infants in that moment, carried in the arms of our parents. Shortly before the anointing with the Oil of Catechumens, the symbol of God's strength in the fight against evil, the priest invited the entire assembly to pray for those who were about to receive Baptism, invoking the intercession of the saints. That was the first time in which, in the course of our lives, we were given this gift of the companionship of "big" brothers and sisters — the saints — who had taken this same path before us, who knew the same struggles and who live forever in God's embrace. The Letter to the Hebrews defines this company which surrounds us with the expression: "a great cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1). So are the saints: a great cloud of witnesses.

Christians do not despair in the fight against evil. Christianity cultivates an *incurable trust*: it does not believe that negative and disintegrating forces can prevail. The last word on the history of mankind is not hatred; it is not death; it is not war. In each of life's moments, the hand of God assists us, as well as the discrete presence of all the believers who "have gone before us marked with the sign of faith" (Roman Canon). Their existence tells us, above all, that Christian life is not an unattainable ideal. And at the same time, it comforts us: we are not alone. The Church is made up of innumerable, often anonymous, brothers and sisters who preceded us and who, through the action of the Holy Spirit, are involved in the affairs of those who still live here on earth.

That of Baptism is not the only invocation of the saints that marks

the journey of Christian life. When an engaged couple consecrate their love in the Sacrament of Matrimony, the intercession of saints is once again invoked for them — this time as a couple. And this invocation is a source of trust for the two young people who embark on the “journey” of married life. Those who love truly have the desire and the courage to say “for ever” — “for ever” — but they know they will need the grace of Christ and the help of saints to be able to live their married life for ever. Not as some say: “as long as love lasts”. No: for ever! Otherwise, it is better that you not marry. Either for ever or not at all. For this reason, in the wedding liturgy, we invoke the presence of the saints. And in difficult times, courage is needed to raise one’s eyes to heaven, thinking of the many Christians who have undergone tribulation and have kept their baptismal garments white, bathing them in the blood of the lamb (cf. Rev 7:14): so says the Book of Revelation. God never abandons us. Each time we need it, one of his angels will come to lift us up again and give us comfort; “angels”, at times with a human face and heart because God’s saints are always here, hidden in our midst. This is difficult to understand and also to imagine, but saints are present in our lives. And when someone invokes a saint, it is precisely because they are near us.

Priests also cherish the memory of an invocation of saints prayed over them. It is one of the most touching moments of the Liturgy of Ordination. The candidates lie on the floor, face down. And the whole assembly, led by the bishop, invokes the intercession of the saints. A man would be crushed beneath the weight of the mission entrusted to him, but feeling that all of heaven is in his favour, that the grace of God will not be lacking because Jesus is always faithful, then one can set out feeling calm and encouraged. We are not alone.

And what are we? We are dust that aspires to the Heavens. Our strength is weak, but the mystery of the grace that is present in the life of Christians is powerful. We are faithful to this earth which Jesus loved every instant of his life, but we know and we want to hope in the transfiguration of the world, in its definitive accomplishment where finally, there will be no more tears, evil or suffering.

May the Lord give all of us *the hope of being saints*. But some of you

might ask me: “Father, can one be a saint in everyday life?”. Yes, it is possible. “But does this mean that we have to pray all day?”. No, it means that you must do your duty all day: pray, go to work, take care of your children. But everything must be done with the heart open to God, so that work, even in illness and suffering, in difficulty too, is open to God. And in this way one can become a saint. May the Lord give us the hope to be saints. Let us not think that it is a difficult thing, that it is easier to be delinquents than saints! No. We can be saints because the Lord helps us; he is the One who helps us.

This is the great gift that each of us can make to the world. May the Lord grant us the grace to believe so profoundly in him as to become for this world the image of Christ. Our history needs “mystics”: people who reject all dominion, who aspire to charity and fraternity; men and women who live, also accepting a portion of suffering because they take on the burdens of others. But without these men and women, the world would have no hope. For this reason, I wish for you — and I also wish for me — that the Lord may grant us the hope of being saints.

Thank you!

Hope, the fortitude of the martyrs

General audience of 28 June 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today we reflect on *Christian hope as the strength of martyrs*. When in the Gospel Jesus sends the disciples on mission, he does not mislead them with mirages of easy success. On the contrary he warns them clearly that the proclamation of the Kingdom of God always involves opposition. And he also uses an extreme expression: “and you will be hated — hated — by all for my name’s sake” (Mt 10:22). Christians love but they are not always loved. Jesus places us before this reality from the start. In a somewhat strong measure, the confession of faith occurs in a hostile climate.

Christians are therefore men and women who “go against the tide”. It is normal: because the world is marked by sin which manifests itself in various forms of selfishness and injustice; those who follow Christ walk in the opposite direction. Not due to an argumentative spirit, but because of loyalty to the rationale of the Kingdom of God, which is a *logic of hope* that translates into a lifestyle based on the instructions of Jesus.

And the first instruction is *poverty*. When Jesus sends his [disciples] on mission, it seems that he takes more care to “strip” them than to “clothe” them! In effect, a Christian who is not humble and poor, detached from wealth and power and, above all, detached from self, does not resemble Jesus. Christians travel their path in this world with the essentials for the journey but with their heart filled with love. The true defeat for him or for her is to fall into the temptation of revenge and violence, responding to evil with evil. Jesus tells us: “I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves” (Mt 10:16). Therefore without jaws,

without claws, without weapons, the Christian will have to be rather prudent; at times even shrewd. These are virtues that are accepted by the logic of the Gospel. But never violence. In order to overcome evil, one cannot use the same methods of evil.

The only strength Christians have is the Gospel. In difficult times, one must believe that Jesus is before us and does not cease to accompany his disciples. Persecution is not in contradiction to the Gospel but rather is part of it. If they persecuted our Teacher, how can we hope to be spared the fight? However, in the midst of the storm, Christians must not lose hope, thinking that they have been abandoned. Jesus assures his disciples: “even the hairs on your head are all numbered” (Mt 10:30); as if to say that none of man’s suffering, not even that which is most minute and hidden, is invisible to the eyes of God. God sees and certainly protects; and he will give his redemption. There is in fact in our midst Someone who is stronger than evil, stronger than the mafia, than the obscure conspiracies of those who profit at the expense of desperate people, than those who crush others with disdain.... Someone who has always listened to the cry of Abel’s blood from the earth.

Christians therefore, must always be found on the “opposite side” of the world, that chosen by God: not persecutors but persecuted; not arrogant but meek; not charlatans but submissive to the truth; not imposters but honest men and women.

This fidelity to Jesus’ style — which is a style of hope — until death, was to be called a beautiful name by the first Christians: “*martyrdom*”, meaning “*witness*”. There were so many other possibilities offered by the vocabulary: it could have been called heroism, abnegation, self-sacrifice. Yet the Christians of the first hour identified it with a term that suggests discipleship. Martyrs do not live for themselves; they do not fight to assert their own ideas, and they accept having to die solely out of loyalty to the Gospel. Martyrdom is not even the supreme ideal of Christian life, because over and above it there is charity, that is, the love of God and of neighbour. The Apostle Paul says it very well in the hymn to charity, understood as love of God and of neighbour. The Apostle

Paul says it very well in the hymn to charity: “If I give away all I have and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor 13:3). The idea that suicide bombers may be called “martyrs” is repulsive to Christians: there is nothing in their quest that can come close to the attitude of the children of God.

Sometimes, reading the stories of so many of yesterday’s and today’s martyrs, — who are more numerous than the martyrs of the early days — we are amazed at the strength with which they have faced the supreme trial. This strength is a sign of the *great hope* that animated them: the certain hope that nothing and no one could separate them from God’s love given to us in Jesus Christ (cf. Rom 8:38-39).

May God always give us the strength to be his witnesses. May he give us the opportunity to live out Christian hope especially in the hidden martyrdom of performing our daily obligations well and with love. Thank you.

Baptism, the gateway to hope

General audience of 2 August 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

There was a time when churches were oriented toward the East. You entered the sacred building from a door at the west end and, walking along the nave, you moved eastward. It was an important symbol for old-world man, an allegory which, in the course of history, has gradually died out. We men and women of the modern epoch, much less accustomed to grasping the great signs of the cosmos, hardly ever notice details of this sort. The West is the cardinal point of the setting sun, where the light dies out. The East, however, is the place where the shadows are overcome by the first light of dawn and it reminds us of Christ, the Sun risen on high, at the world's horizon (cf. Lk 1:78).

The ancient Rites of Baptism called for the catechumens to pronounce the first part of their profession of faith keeping their gaze turned to the West. And in that stance they were asked: "Do you renounce Satan, his service and his works?" — And the future Christians repeated in chorus: "I do!". Then they turned toward the apse, in the direction of the East, where the light is born, and the candidates for Baptism were again questioned: "Do you believe in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?". And this time they responded: "I do!".

In modern times the appeal of this Rite has been partially lost: we have lost sensitivity to the language of the cosmos. Naturally there remains the profession of faith made according to the Baptismal interrogation, which is proper to the celebration of several sacraments. However its significance remains intact. What does it mean to be Christians? It means looking to the light, continuing to make the

profession of faith in the light, even when the world is enveloped in darkness and shadows.

Christians are not exempt from external and even internal shadows. They do not live outside of the world, however; by the grace of Christ received in Baptism they are “oriented” men and women: they do not believe in darkness, but in the dim light of day; they do not succumb to the night, but hope in the dawn; they are not defeated by death, but yearn to rise again; they are not cowered by evil, because they always trust in the infinite possibilities of good. And this is our Christian hope: the light of Jesus, the salvation that Jesus brings to us with his light that saves us from the darkness.

We are those who believe that God is Father: this is the light! We are not orphans; we have a Father and our Father is God. We believe that Jesus descended among us; he shared our life, making himself companion above all to the poorest and most frail: this is the light! We believe that the Holy Spirit works unceasingly for the good of humanity and of the world, and that even the worst suffering of history will be overcome: this is the hope that awakens us each morning! We believe that every affection, every friendship, every good yearning, every love, even the most minute and neglected, one day will find fulfilment in God: this is the power that spurs us to embrace our daily life with enthusiasm! And this is our hope: to live in hope and live in light, in the light of God the Father, in the light of Jesus the Saviour, in the light of the Holy Spirit who urges us to go forth in life.

There is then another very beautiful sign of the baptismal liturgy that reminds us of the importance of light. At the end of the Rite, the parents — if it is a child — or the baptized themselves — if they are adults — are consigned a candle, whose flame is lit from the Paschal Candle. It is a large candle that on Easter night enters the completely dark church, to demonstrate the mystery of Jesus’ Resurrection; from that candle everyone lights their own candle and passes the flame on to those nearby: in that sign is the slow propagation of the Resurrection of Jesus in the lives of all Christians. The life of the Church — I will say a rather strong word — is contagious light. The more light of Jesus we

Christians have, the more light of Jesus there is in the life of the Church, the more alive she is. The life of the Church is the contagion of light.

The most beautiful exhortation that we can address to each other is to always remember our Baptism. I would like to ask you: how many of you remember the date of your Baptism? Do not answer because some may feel embarrassed! Think, and if you do not remember it, today you have homework to do: go to your mom, to your dad, to your aunt, to your uncle, to your grandma, grandpa, and ask them: “What is the date of my Baptism?”. And never forget it again! Is that clear? Will you do it? Today’s task is to learn or remember the date of Baptism, which is the date of rebirth; it is the date of light; it is the date in which — allow me to say — in which we were infected by the light of Christ. We are born twice over: the first time into natural life; the second, thanks to the encounter with Christ, at the Baptismal font. There we died unto death, in order to live as children of God in this world. There we became human as we never could have imagined. This is why we all must spread the fragrance of the Chrism, with which we were anointed on the day of our Baptism. In us lives and operates the Spirit of Jesus, first born of many brothers and sisters, of all those who oppose the inevitability of darkness and death.

What a grace it is when a Christian truly becomes a “cristo-foro”, which means “bearer of Jesus” in the world! Above all for those who are experiencing situations of grief, of despair, of darkness and of hate. This can be understood from many fine details: from the light that a Christian conserves in his eyes, from the foundation of peace which is not undermined even on the most complicated of days, from the wish to begin to love again even when we have experienced many disappointments. In the future, when the story of our days is written, what will it say about us? That we were capable of hope, or that we put our light under a bushel? If we are true to our Baptism, we will spread the light of the hope — Baptism is the beginning of hope, that hope — of God, and we will be able to pass on to future generations the meaning of life.

Divine forgiveness, the reason for our hope

General audience of 9 August 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

We have heard the reaction of the dining companions of Simon the Pharisee: “*Who is this, who even forgives sins?*” (Lk 7:49).

Jesus has just made a scandalous gesture. A woman of the city, known by all as a sinner, entered Simon’s house, stooped at Jesus’ feet and anointed them with fragrant oil. All those who were there at the table were whispering: if Jesus is a prophet, he should not accept such gestures from a woman like that. Those poor women, who served only to be met in secret, even by leaders, or to be stoned. According to the mentality of the time, there must be a clear division between saint and sinner, between pure and impure.

But Jesus’ attitude is different. From the beginning of his ministry in Galilee, he approaches lepers, the demon-possessed, all the sick and the marginalized. Conduct of the kind was not at all customary, such that Jesus’ compassion for the excluded, the “untouchable”, will be one of the things that upsets his contemporaries the most.

Wherever there is a person who suffers, Jesus takes on their burden, and that suffering becomes his own. Jesus does not preach that the condition of suffering must be borne with heroism, in the manner of stoic philosophers. Jesus shares human pain and, when he comes across it, that attitude which characterizes Christianity — mercy — gushes forth from his heart. Jesus feels mercy in the face of human suffering; Jesus’ heart is merciful. Jesus feels compassion. Literally: Jesus feels his heart tremble. Many times in the Gospel we meet with this type of reaction. Christ’s heart embodies and reveals the heart of God, who, wherever there is a man or woman suffering, wishes healing,

liberation, full life for him or her.

This is why Jesus *opens his arms to sinners*. How many people even today persist in an ill-chosen life because they have found no one willing to look at them in a different way, with the eyes, or better, with the heart of God, that is, to look at them *with hope*. Jesus instead sees a possibility for resurrection even in those who have amassed many mistaken choices. Jesus is always there, with an open heart; he throws open that mercy that he has in his heart; he forgives, embraces, understands and draws near: that is how Jesus is!

At times we forget that for Jesus it is not a matter of easy, low-cost love. The Gospels reveal the first negative reactions toward Jesus precisely when he forgives a man's sins (cf. Mk 2:1-12). It is a man who is suffering doubly: because he cannot walk and because he feels "inadequate". And Jesus understands that the second pain is greater than the first, to the extent that He greets him immediately with a message of liberation: "My son, your sins are forgiven" (v. 5). He frees that oppressive sense of feeling inadequate. It is then that several scribes — those who believe they are perfect: I think of the many Catholics who believe they are perfect and scorn others ... this is sad — several scribes present there are scandalized by Jesus' words, which sound like blasphemy, because only God can forgive sins.

We who are accustomed to experiencing the forgiveness of sins, perhaps at too "low" a "cost", must at times remind ourselves of how high a price God's love for us has cost. Each of us has cost a great deal: Jesus' life! He would have offered it even for just one of us. Jesus does not go to the Cross because he heals the sick, because he preaches charity, because he proclaims the beatitudes. The Son of God goes to the cross above all because he forgives sins, because he wants the total, definitive liberation of man's heart. Because he does not accept that the human being exhausts his entire existence with this indelible "tattoo", with the thought of not being able to be welcomed by the merciful heart of God. And with these sentiments Jesus goes to encounter sinners, which we all are.

This is how sinners are forgiven. They are not just comforted on the

psychological level, because they are freed from the sense of guilt. Jesus does much more: he offers people who have made mistakes *the hope of a new life*. “But Lord, I am but a rag” — “Look forward and I will make you a new heart”. This is the hope that Jesus gives us. A life marked by love. Matthew the publican becomes an Apostle of Christ: Matthew, who is a traitor to his country, an exploiter of the people. Zacchaeus, the rich, corrupt man from Jericho — this man surely had a degree in bribery — is transformed into a benefactor of the poor. The Samaritan woman, who had five husbands and is now living with another, hears the promise of “living water” which can well up within her forever (cf. Jn 4:14). This is how Jesus changes hearts; he does so with all of us.

It does us good to consider that God did not choose people who never make mistakes as the first dough to shape his Church. The Church is a people of sinners who feel the mercy and forgiveness of God. Peter understood the truth about himself more from the crowing of the cock than from his impulses of generosity, which swelled his chest, making him feel superior to others.

Brothers and sisters, we are all poor sinners, in need of God’s mercy which has the power to transform us and to give us back hope, and to do this every day. And he does! And to the people who understand this fundamental truth, God gives the most beautiful mission in the world, namely, love for brothers and sisters, and the message of a mercy which He does not deny anyone. And this is our hope. Let us go forth with this trust in the forgiveness, in the merciful love of Jesus.

“I make all things new” (Rev 21:5). The novelty of Christian hope

General audience of 23 August 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

We have heard the Word of God in the Book of Revelation, as follows: “Behold, I make all things new” (21:5). Christian hope is based on faith in God who always creates newness in the life of mankind, creates novelty in history, creates novelty in the universe. Our God is the God who creates newness, because he is the God of surprises.

It is not Christian to walk with one’s gaze directed downward — as swine do: they always go along in this way — without lifting one’s eyes to the horizon. As if our entire journey terminated here, in the span of a few metres travelled; as if our life had no goal and no mooring, and we were compelled to wander endlessly, without any reason for our many toils. This is not Christian.

The closing pages of the Bible show us the ultimate horizon of our journey as believers: the heavenly Jerusalem, the celestial Jerusalem. It is envisioned first of all as an immense tent, where God will welcome all mankind so as to dwell with them definitively (21:3). This is our hope. And what will God do, when we are with him at last? He will be infinitely tender in our regard, as a father who welcomes his children who have long toiled and suffered. John prophesies in Revelation: “Behold the dwelling of God is with men.... He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.... Behold, I make all things new” (21:3-5). The God of newness!

Try meditating on this passage of Sacred Scripture not in a distracted way, but after reading a chronicle of our days, after seeing the TV news or the front page of newspapers, where there are so many tragedies, where they report distressing news that we all risk becoming used to. And I have greeted several people from Barcelona: how many sad reports from there! I have greeted several from Congo, and how much sad news there is from there! And how very much more! To name only two countries of some of you who are here.... Try thinking about the faces of children frightened by war, of the despair of mothers, of the shattered dreams of so many young people, of refugees who undertake terrible journeys, and who are so often exploited.... This, unfortunately, is also life. At times one might say that it is this above all.

This may be so. But there is a Father who weeps with us; there is a Father who sheds tears of infinite compassion for his children. We have a Father who knows how to weep, who weeps with us. A Father who awaits us in order to console us, because he knows our suffering and has prepared a different future for us. This is the great vision of Christian hope, which expands over all the days of our life, and seeks to raise us up once more.

God did not desire our lives by mistake, obliging himself and us to experience harsh nights of anguish. He instead created us because he wants us to be happy. He is our Father, and if we here, now, experience a life that is not what he planned for us, Jesus guarantees that God himself is working out his redemption. He is working to redeem us.

We believe and we know that death and hate are not the final words pronounced on the parabola of human existence. Being Christians entails a new perspective: a gaze full of hope. Some believe that life retains all its happiness in youth and in the past, and that living is a slow deterioration. Still others hold that our joys are only fleeting episodes, and that the life of mankind is bound in meaninglessness. Those who, in the face of many calamities, say: "Life has no meaning. Our path is meaningless". But we Christians do not think this. Rather, we believe that on mankind's horizon there is a sun that shines forever. We believe that our most beautiful days are yet to come. We are more

people of the Spring than of Autumn. I would like to ask, now — each one answer in your heart, in silence, but respond: “Am I a man, a woman, a boy, a girl of the Springtime or of Autumn? Is my spirit in the Spring or in Autumn? Each one answer silently. Let us view the buds of a new world rather than the yellowed leaves on its branches. Let us not cultivate nostalgia, regret and sorrow: we know that God wants us to be heirs of a promise and tireless growers of dreams. Do not forget that question: “Am I a person of the Spring or of Autumn?”. Of Springtime, which expects flowers, which expects fruit, which expects the sun that is Jesus; or of Autumn, which is always with the face looking down, disheartened and, as I have said at times, with a sour face like pickled peppers.

The Christian knows that the Kingdom of God, its dominion of Love, is growing as a great field of wheat, even if in the middle there are weeds. There are always problems; there is gossip; there are wars; there is illness ... there are problems. But the wheat ripens, and in the end evil will be eliminated. The future does not belong to us, but we know that Jesus Christ is life's greatest grace, is the embrace of God who awaits us at the end, but who is already accompanying us now and comforts us on the journey. He leads us to the great “dwelling” of God with mankind (cf. Rev 21:3), with many other brothers and sisters, and we will bring to God the memory of the days lived here on earth. It will be lovely to discover in that instant that nothing has been lost, no smile and no tear. However long our life might be, it will seem to us to have been lived in one breath. And that creation did not stop on the sixth day of Genesis, but continued tirelessly, because God is always looking after us. Until the day in which all shall be fulfilled, in the morning in which tears shall fade away, in the very instant in which God shall pronounce his final word of blessing: “Behold” — says the Lord — “I make all things new” (v. 5). Yes, our Father is the God of newness and of surprise. And that day we will be truly happy, and we will weep, yes, but we will weep tears of joy.

The memory of our vocation revives our hope

General audience of 30 August 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today I would like to return to an important theme: the relationship between hope and memory, with particular reference to the memory of vocation. I take the call of Jesus' first disciples as an icon. This experience made such an impression on their memory that one of them even noted the time: it was about four in the afternoon (cf. Jn 1:39). The Evangelist John tells the story as a clear recollection from his youth, left untouched in his memory as an old man: because John wrote these things when he was already old.

The encounter took place near the Jordan River, where John the Baptist was baptizing; and those young Galileans had chosen the Baptist as their spiritual guide. One day Jesus came and was baptized in the river. The following day he passed by again and it was then that the Baptizer, that is, John the Baptist, told two of his disciples: "Behold, the Lamb of God!" (v. 36).

And for those two, it is the "spark". They leave their first teacher and begin to follow Jesus. On the way, he turns to them and asks the decisive question: "What do you seek?" (v. 38). In the Gospels, Jesus appears as an expert on the human heart. At that moment he met two young men, searching, with a healthy restlessness. Indeed, what youth is a satisfied youth without a quest for meaning? Young people who seek nothing are not young people; they are retired; they have aged prematurely. It is sad to see young people in retirement... And throughout the entire Gospel, in all of the encounters that happen to him along the way, Jesus appears as an "incendiary" of hearts. From this springs that question of his that seeks to bring out the desire for life

and happiness that every young person bears inside: “What do you seek?”. I too would like to ask the young people here in the Square today, and those who are listening via the media: “You, who are young, what do you seek? What are you looking for in your heart?”.

John and Andrew’s vocation begins in this way: it is the beginning of a friendship with Jesus so strong as to impose a commonality of life and of passions with Him. The two disciples begin to stay with Jesus and immediately become missionaries, because when the encounter ends, they do not calmly return home: in fact, their respective brothers — Simon and James — soon become engaged as followers. They go to them and say: “We have found the Messiah; we have found a great prophet”: they share the news. They are missionaries in that encounter. It was such a touching, such a happy meeting that the disciples will remember forever that day which illuminated and gave direction to their youth.

How can we discover our own vocation in this world? It can be discovered in many ways, but this passage of the Gospel tells us that the first indicator is the joy of the encounter with Jesus. Marriage, consecrated life, priesthood: every true vocation begins with an encounter with Jesus who gives us joy and hope anew; and he leads us, even through trials and difficulties, to an ever fuller encounter; that encounter, the encounter with him, grows greater, and to the fullness of joy.

The Lord does not want men and women who walk behind him reluctantly, without having the wind of gladness in their hearts. You who are here in the Square, I ask you — each of you respond to yourself — do you have the wind of gladness in your heart? Each of you ask yourself: “Do I have within me, in my heart, the wind of gladness?”. Jesus wants people who understand that being with him bestows immense happiness, which can be renewed every day of our life. A disciple of God’s Kingdom who is not joyful does not evangelize this world; he is sad. We become Jesus’ preachers not by sharpening the weapons of rhetoric: you can talk, talk, talk, but if there is nothing else.... How do we become preachers of Jesus? By keeping the sparkle of

true happiness in our eyes. We see many Christians, even among us, who transmit the joy of faith with their eyes: with their eyes!

For this reason, a Christian, like the Virgin Mary, keeps alive the flame of falling in love: in love with Jesus. Certainly there are trials in life; there are moments in which it is necessary to go forward despite the cold and the crosswinds, despite much bitterness. But Christians know the way that leads to that sacred fire which ignited them once and for ever.

But please, I implore you: let us not give credence to embittered and unhappy people; let us not listen to those who cynically recommend not cultivating hope in life; let us not trust those who extinguish all nascent enthusiasm, saying that no undertaking is worth the sacrifice of a whole life; let us not listen to those “old” at heart who stifle youthful euphoria. Let us go to the elderly who have eyes sparkling with hope! Instead, let us cultivate healthy utopias: God wants us to be able to dream like him and with him, as we journey, well aware of reality. Dream of a different world. And if one dream is snuffed out, [let us] go back to dreaming of it again, drawing with hope from the memory of the beginning, from those embers that, perhaps after not such a good life, are hidden under the ashes of the first encounter with Jesus.

Here then, is a fundamental dynamic of Christian life: remembering Jesus. Paul said to his disciple: “Remember Jesus Christ” (2 Tim 2:8); this is the advice of the great Saint Paul: “Remember Jesus Christ”. [Let us] remember Jesus, the loving fire by which one day we understood our life as a project of good, and with this flame, [let us] rekindle our hope.

Educating in hope

General audience of 20 September 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

The theme of today's catechesis is "*teaching hope*". This is why I will address it directly, with "you", imagining that I am speaking as an educator, as a father to a young person or to any other person who is open to learning.

Think; there, where God has planted you, hope! Always hope.

Do not surrender to the night; remember that the first enemy to conquer is not outside: it is within you. Therefore, do not give space to bitter, obscure thoughts. This world is the first miracle God made. God has placed the grace of new wonders in our hands. Faith and hope go forward together. Believe in the existence of the loftiest and most beautiful truths. Trust in God the Creator, in the Holy Spirit who moves everything towards the good, in the embrace of Christ who awaits every man and woman at the end of their life. Believe, he awaits you. The world walks thanks to the gaze of many men and women who have opened up breaches, who have built bridges, who have dreamed and believed, even when they heard derisive words around them.

Never think that the struggle you engage in here on earth is completely useless. Ruin does not await us at the end of life. A seed of the absolute is beating within us. God does not disappoint: if he has placed hope in our hearts, he does not want to crush it with continuous frustrations. Everything is born to flourish in an eternal Spring. God also created us to flourish. I remember that dialogue, when the oak tree asks the almond tree: 'Speak to me about God'. And the almond tree blossomed.

Wherever you may be, build! If you are down, stand up! Never stay down; stand up, allow yourself to be helped to stand up. If you are seated, set out on a journey! If boredom paralyzes you, banish it with good works! If you feel empty or demoralized, ask that the Holy Spirit may fill your emptiness anew.

Work for peace among people, and do not listen to the voice of those who spread hate and discord. Do not listen to these voices. As different as they are from each other, human beings were created to live together. In conflicts, be patient: one day you will discover that each person is the custodian of a fragment of truth.

Love people. Love them one by one. Respect everyone's journey, be it linear or troubled, because everyone has their story to tell. Each of us too has our own story to tell. Every child born is the promise of a life which once again reveals itself to be stronger than death. Every love which springs up is a power for transformation which yearns for happiness.

Jesus has given us a light which shines in the darkness: defend it; protect it. That single light is the greatest treasure entrusted to your life.

And above all, dream! Do not be afraid to dream. Dream! Dream of a world which cannot yet be seen, but which will surely arrive. Hope leads us to believe in the existence of a creation which expands until the definitive fulfillment, when God will be everything in everyone. Men and women capable of imagination have given mankind the gifts of scientific and technological discoveries. They have sailed the oceans; they have tread on lands on which no one has ever set foot before. The men and women who have sown hope are also those who have conquered slavery, and brought about better living conditions on this earth. Think about these men and women.

Be responsible for this world and for the life of each person. Consider that every injustice against a poor person is an open wound and belittles your very dignity. Life does not stop at your existence, and other generations will come into this world, to follow ours, and still many others. Each day, ask God for the gift of courage. Remember that

Jesus conquered fear for us. He conquered fear! Our most treacherous enemy can do nothing against faith. And when you feel afraid in the face of one of life's difficulties, remember that you do not live for yourself alone. In Baptism, your life was already immersed in the mystery of the Trinity and you belong to Jesus. And if one day you should be taken by fear, or you think that evil is too great to be challenged, simply consider that Jesus lives within you. It is he who, through you, with his meekness, wishes to conquer all of mankind's enemies: sin, hatred, crime, violence; all of our enemies.

Always have the courage of truth, but remember: you are not superior to anyone. Always remember this: you are superior to no one. Even should you be the last one who believes in the truth, do not for this reason spurn the company of men. Even should you live in the silence of a hermitage, bear in your heart the suffering of every creature. You are Christian; and in prayer you offer everything to God.

And cultivate ideals. Live for something that transcends mankind, and if these ideals should one day present you with a hefty bill to pay, do not stop bearing them in your heart. Faithfulness obtains all.

If you make a mistake, stand up again. There is nothing more human than making mistakes. And these same mistakes must not become a prison for you. Do not be trapped in your errors. The Son of God has come not for the healthy but for the sick; thus, he also came for you. And if you should err again in the future, do not be afraid; stand up again! Do you know why? Because God is your friend.

If bitterness strikes you, believe firmly in all the people who still work for the good: in their humility there is the seed of a new world. Associate with people who have safeguarded their heart like that of a child. Learn from wonder; nurture astonishment.

Live, love, dream, believe. And, with the grace of God, never despair.

The enemies of hope

General audience of 27 September 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

At this time we are speaking about hope; but today, I would like to reflect with you on *the enemies of hope* because hope has its enemies: just like any good in this world has its enemies.

The ancient myth of Pandora's box comes to mind: the opening of the box unleashes so many catastrophes in world history. Few people however, remember the last part of the story which reveals a glimmer of light: after all the evils have come out of the open box, a tiny gift appears to turn the tables on all that evil that is spreading. Pandora, the woman who had the box in her custody, sees it at last: the Greeks call it *elpis* which means *hope*.

This myth tells us why hope is so important for humanity. It is not right to say that “while there's life there is hope”. If anything, it is the contrary: it is hope that supports life, that protects it, safeguards it and makes it grow. If men and women had not nurtured hope, if they had not held on to this virtue, they would never have come out of the caves and they would have left no trace on the history of the world. It is the most divine thing that can exist in the heart of mankind.

A French poet — Charles Péguy — has left us beautiful pages on hope (cf. *The Portico of the Mystery of the Second Virtue*). He says in a poetic way, that God is not amazed so much by the faith of human beings and not even by their charity — but what really fills him with wonder and moves him — is the hope of the people: “That those poor children”, he writes, “see how things are going and believe that they will be better tomorrow morning”. The poet's image recalls the faces of many people who have transited through this world — farmers, poor

labourers, migrants in search of a better future — who have struggled tenaciously despite the bitterness of a difficult present, filled with many trials, enlivened however, by the trust that their children would have a more just and serene life. They fought for their children; they fought in hope.

Hope is the force that drives the hearts of those who depart, leaving home, their homeland, at times their relatives and families — I am thinking of the migrants —, in search of a better life which is worthier of them and their loved ones. And it is also the impulse in the heart of those who welcome: the desire to encounter, to get to know each other, to dialogue.... Hope is the force that drives us “to share the journey”, because the journey is made *jointly*: by those who come to our land, and by us who go towards their heart, to understand them, to understand their culture, their language. It is a joint journey by two parties; but without hope, that journey cannot be made. Hope is the drive to share the journey of life as the *Caritas* campaign which we are inaugurating today reminds us. Brothers and sisters, let us not be afraid of sharing the journey! Have no fear! Let us not be afraid of sharing hope!

Hope is not a virtue for people with a full stomach. That is why *the poor have always been the first bearers of hope*. And in this sense, we can say that the poor, even beggars, are history’s protagonists. In order to enter the world, God needed them: Joseph, and Mary, the shepherds of Bethlehem. On the night of the first Christmas, the world was asleep, laying upon a bed of acquired certainties. But humble, hidden people were preparing the revolution of goodness. They were poor in everything; some remained afloat just above the subsistence level but they had a wealth of the most valuable asset that exists in this world: that is, the desire for change.

At times, having had everything life offers is a misfortune. Think about a young man who was never taught the virtues of expectation and patience, who did not have to sweat over anything, who had burned his bridges and at 20 “already knows how the world turns”. He is destined to receive the worst punishment: that of not wanting anything anymore.

This is the worst punishment. Closing the door to desires, to dreams. He seems like a young man, yet autumn has already descended on his heart. These are the young people of autumn.

Having an empty soul is the worst obstacle to hope. It is a danger from which no one can say they are exempt; because to be tempted against hope can happen even along the journey of Christian life. The monks of ancient times had identified one of the greatest enemies of fervour. They said this: that “midday demon” that flanks a life of labour, is precisely as the sun burns on high. This temptation surprises us when we least expect it: the days become monotonous and boring, no aim seems worthy of fatigue. This attitude is called *sloth*, that erodes life from within until it leaves it like an empty shell.

When this happens, the Christian knows that that condition must be fought against, never accepted with inertia. God created us for joy and happiness and not to wallow in melancholic thoughts. This is why it is important to safeguard one’s heart, defending ourselves from sad temptations that surely do not come from God. And whereas our strength appears weak and the battle against anxiety is particularly arduous, we can always turn to Jesus’ name. We can repeat that simple prayer, traces of which we also find in the Gospels and that has become the foundation of so many Christian spiritual traditions: A lovely prayer. “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner!”. This is a prayer of hope because I turn to Him, He who can open the doors wide and resolve the problem and have me look to the horizon, the horizon of hope.

Brothers and sisters, we are not alone in fighting against desperation. If Jesus overcame the world, he is capable of overcoming in us all that opposes goodness. If God is with us, no one will steal from us that virtue which we absolutely need for life. No one will rob us of hope. Let’s go forward!

I am pleased to greet the representatives of *Caritas* who have come here to officially launch the campaign, “Share the Journey” — a nice name for your campaign: sharing the journey —, that I wanted to coincide with this Audience. I welcome the migrants, the asylum

seekers and refugees who, together with the staff and volunteers of *Caritas Italiana* and other Catholic organizations, are the sign of a Church which tries to be open, inclusive and welcoming. Thank you all for your tireless service. [*To the public:*] You have already applauded, but they all truly deserve a loud applause, from all of you!

Through your daily efforts, you remind us that Christ himself asks us to welcome our brother and sister migrants and refugees with open arms, with arms wide open. Welcoming in this way, with arms wide open. When our arms are open, we are ready for a sincere embrace, an affectionate embrace, an enveloping hug, a bit like this colonnade in the Square which represents the Mother Church which embraces all in the shared common journey. I welcome also the representatives of many organizations from civil society engaged in assistance to migrants and refugees who, together with *Caritas*, have given their support to the petition for a new law on migration better adapted to the current context. You are all welcome.

Missionaries of hope today

General audience of 4 October 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

In this catechesis, I want to address the theme of “Missionaries of Hope today”. I am pleased to do so at the start of October, the month which the Church dedicates especially to mission, and also on the Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi, who was a great missionary of hope!

Actually the Christian is not a prophet of misfortune. We are not prophets of misfortune. The essence of the Christian proclamation is the opposite, the opposite of misfortune: it is Jesus who died for love and whom God raised on Easter morning. And this is the nucleus of Christian faith. If the Gospels had ended at Jesus’ burial, the story of this prophet would have been added to the many biographies of heroic figures who expended their lives for an ideal. The Gospel would then be an edifying book, and also a comforting one, but it would not be a proclamation of hope.

But the Gospels do not end on Good Friday. They go beyond it; and indeed, it is this additional fragment which transforms our lives. Jesus’ disciples felt dejected on the Saturday after the Crucifixion. The stone that was rolled against the door to the sepulchre had also sealed the three thrilling years they had lived with the Teacher of Nazareth. It seemed that everything was over, and some of them, disappointed and afraid, were already leaving Jerusalem.

But Jesus is Risen! This unexpected fact overturned and amazed the minds and hearts of the disciples because Jesus was not raised for his own sake, as if his rebirth were a prerogative to envy: if he ascended to the Father, it was because he wanted his Resurrection to be shared with every human being and to take each creature Above. And on the day of

Pentecost, the disciples were transformed by the breath of the Holy Spirit. Not only would they have good news to share with everyone, but they themselves would become different from before, as reborn to new life. The Resurrection of Jesus transforms us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is alive. He is alive amongst us. He is living and has the power to transform.

How beautiful it is to think of ourselves as proclaimers of the Resurrection of Jesus, not only in words, but also in our conduct and testimony of life! Jesus does not want disciples who are merely able to repeat memorized formulas. He wants witnesses: people who spread hope, with their way of welcoming, smiling and loving; above all loving because the power of the Resurrection makes Christians capable of loving even when love seems to have lost its motivation. There is a “plus” which embodies Christian life and that cannot be easily explained by fortitude or greater optimism. Faith, our hope, is not just optimism; it is something else, more! It is as if believers have an additional “piece of heaven” over their heads. This is beautiful: we are people with an extra piece of heaven over our heads, accompanied by a presence which some are not even able to sense.

Thus, the task of Christians in this world is to open spaces for salvation, like regenerative cells, capable of infusing the blood of life to what seemed lost forever. When the sky is cloudy, it is a blessing for someone who knows how to talk about the sun. Here then, the true Christian is like this: not whiny and angry, but convinced through the power of the Resurrection that no evil is infinite, no night is without end, no man or woman is definitively wrong and no hatred is impervious to love.

Certainly, at times the disciples would pay a high price for this hope given to them by Jesus. Let us think about the many Christians who did not abandon their people when the time of persecution began. They stayed there, where even the morrow was uncertain, and where no plans of any kind could be made. They remained, hoping in God. And let us think about our brothers and sisters in the Middle East who bear witness to hope and offer their lives for this witness. They are true

Christians! They bring heaven into hearts. They look beyond. They always look beyond. Whoever has had the grace of embracing the Resurrection of Jesus can still hope in the un hoped for. The martyrs of all times, with their fidelity to Christ say that injustice does not have the final word on life. In the Risen Christ we can continue to hope. The men and women who have a “reason” live, resist better than others in times of misfortune. But those who have Jesus at their side, do not fear anything. And this is why, Christians, true Christians, are never easy and accommodating people. Their meekness should not be confused with a sense of insecurity and submission. Saint Paul spurred Timothy to suffer for the Gospel, and he said the following: “God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and love and self control” (2 Tm 1:7). When they fall, they always rise again.

This is why dear brothers and sisters, the Christian is a missionary of hope, not by his or her merits, but thanks to Jesus, the grain of wheat which fell to the earth, died and bore much fruit (cf. Jn 12:24).

Waiting in vigilance

General audience of 11 October 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today I would like to pause on that dimension of hope that is *vigilant waiting*. The theme of vigilance is one of the guiding threads of the New Testament. Jesus preaches to his disciples: “Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the marriage feast, so that they may open to him at once when he comes and knocks” (Lk 12:35-36). In this time that follows the Resurrection of Jesus, in which peaceful moments continually alternate with painful moments, a Christian never rests. The Gospel recommends being as servants who never go to sleep until their master has returned. This world requires our responsibility, and we accept all of it and with love. Jesus wants our existence to be laborious, that we never lower our guard, so as to welcome with gratitude and wonder each new day given to us by God. Every morning is a blank page on which a Christian begins to write with good works. We have *already* been saved by Jesus’ redemption, however, now *we await* the full manifestation of his power: when at last God will be everything to every one (cf. 1 Cor 15:28). Nothing is more certain, in the faith of Christians, than this “appointment”, this appointment with the Lord, when he shall come. And when this day arrives, we Christians want to be like those servants who spent the night with their loins girded and their lamps burning: we must be ready for the salvation that comes; ready for the encounter. Have you thought about what that encounter with Jesus will be like, when he comes? It will be an embrace, an enormous joy, a great joy! We must live in anticipation of this encounter!

Christians are not made for boredom; if anything, for *patience*. We know that hidden in the monotony of certain identical days is a mystery of grace. There are people who with the perseverance of their love become as wells that irrigate the desert. Nothing happens in vain; and no situation in which a Christian finds himself is completely resistant to love. No night is so long as to make us forget the joy of the sunrise. And the darker the night, the closer the dawn. If we remain united with Jesus, the cold of difficult moments does not paralyze us; and if even the whole world preached against hope, if it said that the future would bring only dark clouds, a Christian knows that in that same future there will be Christ's return. No one knows when this will take place, but the thought that at the end of our history there will be Merciful Jesus suffices in order to have faith and not to curse life. Everything will be saved. Everything. We will suffer; there will be moments that give rise to anger and indignation, but the sweet and powerful memory of Christ will drive away the temptation to think that this life is a mistake.

After we have met Jesus, we cannot but *examine history with faith and hope*. Jesus is as a house, and we are inside, and from the windows of this house we look at the world. For this reason we do not close in on ourselves, we do not long with melancholy for a supposedly golden past, but we look ever forward, to a future that is not only our handiwork, but that above all is a constant concern of the providence of God. All that is lacklustre will one day become light.

Let us consider that God never contradicts himself. Never. God never disappoints. His will in our regard is not nebulous but is a well-defined salvific plan: God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). Therefore let us not abandon ourselves to the flow of events with pessimism, as if history were a runaway train. Resignation is not a Christian virtue.

As it is not Christian to shrug one's shoulders or bow one's head before a seemingly inescapable destiny.

One who brings hope to the world is never a submissive person. Jesus recommends we not await him with idle hands: "Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes" (Lk 12:37).

There is no peacemaker who at the end of the day has not compromised his personal peace, taking on the problems of others. A submissive person is not a peace-builder but is an idler, one who wants to be comfortable. Meanwhile a Christian is a peacemaker when he takes risks, when he has the courage to take risks in order to bring good, the good which Jesus has given us, given us as a treasure.

In each day of our life, we repeat that invocation that the first disciples, in their Aramaic language, expressed with the words *Marana tha*, and which we find in the last verse of the Bible, “Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev 22:20). It is the refrain of every Christian life: in our world we need nothing other than Christ’s caress. What a grace if, in prayer, in the difficult days of this life, we hear his voice which responds and assures us: “Behold, I am coming soon” (Rev 22:7)!

Happy are those who die in the Lord

General audience of 18 October 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today I would like to compare Christian hope with the reality of death, a reality that our modern civilization tends more and more to erase. In this way, when death arrives, for those who are close to us or for ourselves, we find we are unprepared, lacking even an appropriate “alphabet” to sketch meaningful words about its mystery, which in any case endures. Even the first traces of human civilization passed precisely through this enigma. We could say that man is born with the worship of the dead.

Other civilizations, before our own, had the courage to look it in the eye. It was an event recounted by the elders to the young generations as an inescapable reality which obliged man to live for an absolute ideal. Psalm 90[89]:12 states: “teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom”. Numbering one’s days makes the heart become wise! The words bring us back to a healthy realism, driving away the delusion of omnipotence. What are we? We are “essentially in vain”, says another Psalm (cf. 89[88]:47); our days go by quickly: even if we lived 100 years, in the end it would seem that it was all a breath. So often I have heard the elderly say: “my life has passed by as a breath...”.

Thus death lays our life bare. It makes us discover that our acts of pride, of anger and of hate have been in vain: totally in vain. We realize with regret that we have not loved enough and have not sought what was essential. And, on the other hand, we see what we have sown that was truly good: the loved ones for whom we sacrificed ourselves and who now take us by the hand.

Jesus illuminated this mystery of our death. By his example, he

permits us to grieve when a dear person passes on. He is “deeply” troubled at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, and “wept” (Jn 11:35). Here, Jesus’ demeanour makes us feel very close to him, our brother. He wept for his friend Lazarus.

Then Jesus prays to the Father, wellspring of life, and commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb. And so it happens. Christian hope draws from Jesus’ approach to human death: if it is present in creation, it is nonetheless an affront that tarnishes God’s loving plan, which the Saviour wishes to remove for our sake.

Elsewhere the Gospels tell of a father who has a very sick daughter, and with faith he beseeches Jesus to save her (cf. Mk 5:21-24, 35-43). There is no figure more moving than that of a father or mother with a sick child. And straight away Jesus goes with that man, whose name is Jairus. At a certain point someone comes from Jairus’ house and says that the girl is dead, and there is no need to trouble the Teacher any further. But Jesus says to Jairus: “Do not fear, only believe” (Mk 5:36). Jesus knows that this man is tempted to react with anger and despair, because the girl has died, and He recommends that Jairus safeguard the little flame that burns in his heart: faith. “Do not fear, just have faith; do not fear, just continue to keep that flame burning!”. Then, when he arrives at the house, he will awaken the girl from death and give her back to her loved ones, alive.

Jesus places us on this “cusp” of faith. He counters Martha’s weeping at the loss of her brother Lazarus, with the light of a dogma: “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” (Jn 11:25-26). That is what Jesus repeats to each one of us, each time that death comes to shred the fabric of life and of our loved ones. Our entire existence is at stake here, between the gradient of faith and the precipice of fear. Jesus says: “I am not death; I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this? Do you believe this?”. We who are here today in the Square, do we believe this?

We are all small and defenceless before the mystery of death. However, what a grace if at that moment we safeguard in our heart the

little flame of faith! Jesus takes us by the hand, as he took Jairus' daughter by the hand, and repeats once again: "Talitha cumi"; "Little girl, arise!" (cf. Mk 5:41). He will say this to us, to each one of us: "Arise, rise again!". I invite you, now, to close your eyes and think about that moment: of our death. Each of us think about our own death, and imagine that moment that will come, when Jesus will take us by the hand and tell us: "Come, come with me, arise". There, hope will end and reality will abide, the reality of life. Think hard: Jesus himself will come to each of us and take us by the hand, with his tenderness, his meekness, his love. Each one repeat Jesus' words in your heart: "Arise, come. Arise, come. Arise, rise again!".

This is our hope in the face of death. For those who believe, it is a door that is thrust open wide; for those who doubt it is a glimmer of light that filters through an exit that is not quite completely closed. But for all of us it will be a grace, when this light, of the encounter with Jesus, illuminates us.

Heaven, the aim of our hope

General audience of 25 October 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

This is the final catechesis on the theme of Christian hope, which has accompanied us since the beginning of this liturgical year. And I will conclude by speaking about Paradise, as the goal of our hope.

“Paradise” is one of the final words pronounced by Jesus on the cross, addressed to the good thief. Let us pause a moment on this scene. Jesus is not alone on the cross. Next to Him, on the right and on the left, there are two wrongdoers. Perhaps, passing in front of those three crosses raised up on Golgotha, one might have breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that finally justice was being done, by putting such people to death.

Next to Jesus there is also a confessed criminal: one who acknowledges that he has deserved that terrible punishment. We call him the “good thief” who, opposing himself to the other one, says: we receive what we have deserved for our actions (cf. *Lk 23: 41*).

On Calvary, on that tragic and holy Friday, Jesus reaches the extreme of His incarnation, of His solidarity with us sinners. There He realises what the prophet Isaiah had said to the suffering Servant: he “was numbered with the transgressors” (53: 12; cf. *Lk 22: 37*).

It is there, on Calvary, that Jesus has His final meeting with a sinner, to throw open also to him the doors of His Kingdom. It is the only time that the word “Paradise” appears in the Gospels. Jesus promises it to this “poor devil” who on the wood of the cross had the courage to address to Him the most humble of requests: “Remember me when you come into Your Kingdom” (*Lk 23: 42*). He had no good deeds to show,

he had nothing, but he trusted in Jesus, Whom he recognised as innocent, good, so different from him (v. 41). That word of humble repentance was enough to touch Jesus' heart.

The good thief reminds us of our true condition before God: that we are His children, that He feels compassion for us, that He is disarmed every time we express to him our nostalgia for His love. In the rooms of many hospitals or in prison cells this miracle is repeated countless times: there is no person, no matter how badly he has lived, to whom there remains only desperation, and to whom grace is prohibited. Before God we all appear empty-handed, a little like the publican in the parable who stopped to pray in the temple aside from the others (cf. *Lk* 18: 13). And every time a man, carrying out the final examination of conscience of his life, discovers that his shortcomings far outweigh his good deeds, he must not be discouraged, but trust in God's mercy.

God is the Father, and until the end He awaits our return. And when the prodigal son returns and begins to confess his faults, his father silences him with an embrace (cf. *Lk* 15: 20).

Paradise is not a fantasy place, nor is it an enchanted garden. Paradise is the embrace of God, infinite Love, and we enter thanks to Jesus, Who died on the cross for us. Where there is Jesus, there is mercy and happiness; without Him there is cold and darkness. In the hour of death, the Christian repeats to Jesus, "Remember me". And even if there were no-one to remind Him of us, Jesus is there, next to us. He wants to take us to the most beautiful place that exists. He wants to take us there with the good there has been in our life, great or small, because nothing is lost of what He had already redeemed. And in the house of the Father He will also take all that which in us still needs to be redeemed: the shortcomings and errors of an entire life. And this is the goal of our existence: that everything is fulfilled, and is transformed into love.

If we believe this, we stop fearing death, and we can also hope to depart from this world in a serene and trustful way. He who has known Jesus no longer fears anything. And we too will be able to repeat the words of the elderly Simeon, also blessed by the encounter with Jesus,

after an entire life consumed in expectation: “Lord, now you are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation” (*Lk 2: 29-30*).

And in that instant, finally, we will no longer need anything, we will no longer see in a confused way. We will no longer weep pointlessly, because everything is passed; even the prophecies, even knowledge. But love no, that remains. Because “love abides” (cf. *1 Cor 13: 8*).

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