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General audience: Christian hope and false idols

In today's general audience, held in the Paul VI Hall, Pope Francis continued his cycle of catechesis dedicated to Christian hope, this time considering the issue of "false idols" that generate false hope.

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

"But it is important that this hope is placed in what can truly help to live and give meaning to our existence", he warned. "This is why the Sacred Scripture puts us on guard against the false hopes that the world presents to us, unmasking their uselessness and demonstrating them as meaningless. And it does so in various ways, but most of all by denouncing the falseness of the idols in whom man is continually tempted to place his trust, making them the object of his hope".

The prophets and the wise in particular insist on this, touching a nerve centre in the believer's journey of faith. "Because faith means trusting in God, but the moment comes when, encountering the difficulties of life, man experiences the fragility of that trust and feels the need for different forms of certainty, for tangible and concrete securities. Then we are tempted to seek consolations, also of a fleeting nature, that seem to fill the emptiness of solitude and to relieve the hardship 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. At times we search for them in a god that can bend to our requests and magically intervene to change reality and make it as we want it to be; an idol, indeed, that in itself can do nothing, that is impotent and deceitful".

"But we like idols, we like them a lot!" the Pope observed. He went on to recount that once, in Buenos Aires, passing through a park he saw lots of small tables where fortune-tellers and tarot readers were seated, and people stood in line to speak with them. "It was always the same story: there is a woman in your life, there are dark times ahead, but everything will turn out well ... and then you pay. And this gives you security? It is the security of, if I may say so, the stupid. Going to a clairvoyant or a card reader: this is an idol! This is an idol, and when we become too attached, we buy false hopes. While that which is the hope of gratuitousness, brought to us by Jesus Christ Who freely gave His life for us, at times we do not trust very much in it".

Francis went on to cite Psalm 115, that describes very clearly the falseness of the idols in whom men of all times have been tempted to trust and to confide their hope: “Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human 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 become like them; so do all who trust them”.

“The psalmist presents to us, in a very ironic way, the entirely ephemeral reality of these idols”, he continued. “And we have to understand that it refers not only to depictions made of metal or other materials, but also those constructed with our mind, when we trust in limited realities that we transform into the absolute, or when we reduce God to our mindsets and our ideas of divinity; a god that resembles us, understandable, predictable, just like the idols the Psalm tells us about. Man, the image of God, fabricates a god in his own image, and it is also a badly-formed image: it does not feel, it does not act, and above all it does not speak. But, we are happier to go to idols than to go to the Lord. We are far more content with the ephemeral hope that this false idol gives us, rather than the great sure hope the Lord gives”.

“The hope of a Lord of life Who with His Word created the world and guides our existence is opposed to the trust in mute simulacra. 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 we sacrifice everything, are all realities that confuse the mind and the heart, and instead of promoting life, lead to death. It is bad to hear and hurts the soul what I heard once, years ago, in the diocese of Buenos Aires: a good woman, very beautiful, who boasted of her beauty, commented as if it were natural, ‘Yes, I had to have an abortion because my figure is very important’. These are idols: they lead us on the wrong path and do not give us happiness”.

The message of the Psalm is very clear: if we place our hope in idols, we will become like them – empty images with hands that do not touch, feet that do not walk, mouths that are unable to speak. There is nothing more to say, one becomes incapable of helping, of changing things, incapable of smiling, of giving, incapable of love. And we too, men of the Church, run this risk when we become worldly. We must remain in the world but defend ourselves against the illusion of the world, which are the idols I mentioned”.

Psalm 115 goes on to reaffirm the need to trust and hope in God, and that God will give His blessing: “Israel, trust in the Lord ... House of Aaron, trust in the Lord ... You who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord ... The Lord has remembered us, He will bless us”. “The Lord always remembers. Even in bad moments, He remembers us. And this is our hope. And hope does not disappoint. Never. Idols always disappoint; they are fantasies, they are not reality”.

“This is the wonderful reality of hope: trusting in the Lord, one becomes like Him, His blessing transforms us into His children, who share His life. Hope in God enables us to enter, so to speak, in the range of influence of His memory that blesses and saves us. And so there emerges the praise of God, living and true, Who was born of Mary for us, Who 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 lets us down”.
