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General Audience

Catechesis of the Holy Father

Greetings in various languages

This morning's General Audience took place at 9.30 a.m. in the Paul VI Hall, where the Holy Father Francis met with groups of pilgrims and faithful from Italy and all over the world.

In his address in Italian the Pope, resuming his new cycle of catechesis on the Commandments, focused on the theme "You shall have no other gods before me" (Bible passage: *Ex 20: 3-5a*).

After summarising his catechesis in several languages, the Holy Father addressed special greetings to the groups of faithful present.

The General Audience concluded with the recital of the *Pater Noster* and the Apostolic Blessing.

Catechesis of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

We have heard the first commandment of the Decalogue: "You shall have no other gods before me" (*Ex 20: 3*). It is good to focus on the theme of idolatry, which is of great importance and current relevance.

The command forbids making idols^[1] and images^[2] of any type of reality^[3]: indeed, everything can be used as

an idol. We are talking about a human tendency, which saves neither believers nor atheists. For example, we Christians may ask ourselves: what is truly my God? Is it the One and Triune Love or is it my image, my personal success, perhaps within the Church? "Idolatry not only refers to false pagan worship. It remains a constant temptation to faith. Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2113).

What is a "god" on an existential level? It is what is at the centre of one's own life and which conditions what one does and thinks[4]. One may grow up in a family which is nominally Christian but which is focused, in reality, on points of reference that are foreign to the Gospel[5]. The human being does not live without focusing on something. And so here the world offers a "supermarket" of idols, which may be objects, images, ideas, roles. For example, prayer too. We must pray to God, our Father. I remember once I went to a parish in Buenos Aires to celebrate Mass, and then I had to celebrate confirmations in another parish a kilometre away. I went on foot, and I crossed a beautiful park. But in that park there were more than fifty little tables, each one with two seats and people seated facing each other. What were they doing? Tarot reading. They went there to "pray" to the idol. Instead of praying to God, which is providence of the future, they went there to have their cards read, to see the future. This is an idolatry of our times. I ask you: how many of you have been to have your cards read, to see the future? How many of you, for example, have been to have your palms read to see the future, instead of praying to the Lord? This is the difference: the Lord is living; the others are idols, idolatries that are no use.

How does an idolatry develop? The commandment describes phases: "You shall not make for yourself an image [...] You shall not bow down to them or worship them" (*Ex 20: 4-5*).

The word "idol" in Greek derives from the verb "to see".[6] An idol is a "vision" which tends to become a fixation, an obsession. The idol is in reality a projection of oneself in objects or in plans. Advertising, for instance, uses this dynamic: I do not see the object in itself but perceive that car, that smartphone, that role (or other things) as a way to realize myself and respond to my essential needs. And I look for it, I speak about that, I think of that: the idea of possessing that object or realizing that plan, reaching that position, seem to be a wonderful way to happiness, a tower for reaching to the sky (cf. *Gen 11: 1-9*), and everything becomes functional to that objective.

And so one enters the second phase: "You shall not bow down to them". Idols demand a cult, rituals; one bows down before them and sacrifices everything. In antiquity human sacrifices were made to idols, but also today: for one's career one sacrifices children, neglecting them or simply not having them; beauty requires human sacrifices; fame requires the immolation of oneself, of one's innocence and authenticity. Idols demand blood. Money steals life and pleasure leads to solitude. Economic structures sacrifice human lives for greater profits. Let us think of the many people without work. Why? Because at times it happens that the managers of that business, of that factory, have decided to lay people off, to earn more money. The idol of money. One lives in hypocrisy, doing or saying what others expect, because the god of one's own affirmation imposes this. And lives are ruined, families are destroyed and young people are abandoned in the hands of destructive models, just to increase profits. Drugs too are an idol. How many young people ruin their health, even their life, adoring this idol of drugs.

Here we arrive at the third and most tragic stage: you shall not "worship them", it says. Idols enslave. They promise happiness but they do not give it; and one finds oneself living for that thing or that vision, caught up in a self-destructive vortex, awaiting a result that never comes.

Dear brothers and sisters, idols promise life, but in reality they take it away. The true God never asks for life but gives it, as a gift. The true God does not offer a projection of our success, but teaches to love. The true God does not ask for children, but gives His Son for us. Idols project future hypotheses and make us disdain the present; the true God teaches to live in the reality of every day, in concrete reality, not with illusions of the future: today and tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, walking towards the future. The concreteness of the true God against the liquidity of idols. I invite you to think today: how many idols do I have, or what is my favourite idol? Because recognizing one's own idolatries is the beginning of grace, and places us on the path of love. Indeed, love is incompatible with idolatry: if something becomes absolute and untouchable, then it is more important than a spouse, a child, or a friendship. Attachment to an object or an idea makes us blind to love. And so to follow

idols, an idol, we can even deny a father, a mother, children, a wife, a husband, the family... the things that are most dear. Attachment to an object or an idea makes us blind to love. Carry this in your heart: idols steal love, idols make us blind to love and to love, one must truly be free of any idol.

What is my idol? Get rid of it and throw it out of the window!

[1] The term *Pesel* indicates “a divine image originally sculpted in wood or in stone, and especially in metal” (L. Koehler – W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 3, p. 949).

[2] The term *Temunah* has a very broad meaning, based on “semblance, form”; therefore, the prohibition is very wide-ranging and these images may be of any type (L. Koehler – W. Baumgartner, *Op. cit*, vol. 1, p. 504).

[3] The commandment does not forbid images in themselves – God Himself will command Moses to produce gold cherubs for the cover of the ark (cf. *Ex* 25: 18) and a bronze snake (cf. *Nm* 21: 8) – but forbids them from being worshipped and served, that is, the entire process of *deification*, not the mere reproduction.

[4] The Hebrew Bible refers to the Canaanite idolatries with the term *Ba’al* which means “lordship, intimate relationship, reality on which one depends”. The idol is that which dominates, grasps the heart and becomes the pivot of life (cf. *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, 247-251).

[5] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2114: “Idolatry is a perversion of man's innate religious sense. An idolater is someone who "transfers his indestructible notion of God to anything other than God" (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 2, 40).

[6] The etymology of the Greek *eidolon*, derived from *eidos*, has the root *weid* which means *to see* (cf. *Grande Lessico dell'Antico Testamento*, Brescia 1967, vol. III, p. 127).

Greetings in various languages

French

I cordially greet French-speaking pilgrims, especially the young people from the parish of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Paris, accompanied by their archbishop. Dear friends, in this rest period, dedicate your time to identify idols that enslave and ask the Lord to free you from them. God bless you!

English

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's audience, particularly the groups from the United States of America. Upon all of you, and your families, I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. God bless you!

German

I extend a heartfelt greeting to German-speaking pilgrims, especially to the many young people here. May the Holy Spirit accompany you in this holiday time, so that you may bring the joy and peace of the Lord to those you meet on your way. God bless you and your families.

Spanish

I cordially greet Spanish-speaking pilgrims from Spain and Latin America.

I encourage you to look within to recognize and eradicate the idols that hold you in bondage and, instead, put in their place the true God, Who will make you free and fully happy.

God bless you. Thank you very much.

Portuguese

Dear Portuguese-speaking friends, taking part in this meeting today: thank you for your presence and above all for your prayers! I greet you all, in particular the members of the *Equipes de Nossa Senhora* of Mogi da Cruzes, and the Portuguese acolytes led by Bishop José Cordeiro, encouraging you to adopt the great ideals of service, which widen the heart and make your talents fruitful. Trust in God, in imitation of the Virgin Mary.

Arabic

I cordially greet Arabic-speaking pilgrims, especially from Egypt and the Middle East. The First Commandment is based on the love for God that frees us from the bondage of idols. This is why God warns us against the worship of every false god. The true God is the one who gives us life and is faithful to His promises. But idols cannot give life and lead only to illusion. May the Lord bless you and protect you from the evil one!

Polish

I cordially greet Polish pilgrims. Dear brothers and sisters, the holiday season is an opportunity not only for rest and for restoring physical and mental strength, but also for reinvigorating our spiritual life and for strengthening our bonds with God and with men. May this be a time of peace, joy and contemplation of the beauty of creation and of art that testifies to the goodness of God for us. May His blessing accompany you always!

Italian

I address a cordial greeting to Italian-speaking pilgrims, in particular the Daughters of Our Lady of Piety, celebrating their General Chapter, and the Daughters of Nazareth on the 125th anniversary of their founding. Dear sisters, I assure you of my prayerful remembrance, so that you may renew daily the oblate dimension of your life in the faithful exercise of Gospel virtues. I greet the *Auxilium* cooperative, which assists minors with psychological problems, and I encourage them to continue their important service to society.

Lastly, I greet young people, the elderly, the sick and newlyweds. Today is the liturgical memorial of Saint Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori, zealous pastor who won the hearts of the people with gentleness and tenderness, fruits of his relationship with God, Who is infinite goodness. May His example help you to live your faith with joy in the simple actions of every day.