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Audience with participants in the 47th National Biblical Week

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the Italian Biblical Association and participants in the 47th National Biblical Week taking place in Rome on the theme “Covenant and covenants between universalism and particularism”.

The following is the text of the address the Pope delivered to those present at the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, welcome!

I am happy to meet you all here, members of the *Italian Biblical Association* and teachers of sacred scripture, gathered in Rome for the *47th National Biblical Week*. The theme you have chosen for your meeting – “Covenant and covenants between universalism and particularism” – is close to my heart, and is one of the Church’s principal current concerns. The three covenants you are reflecting on, in fact, closely involve her relations with the contemporary world.

The covenant with Noah is focused on the relation between humanity and creation. The covenant with Abraham concentrates on the three great monotheistic religions in their common root: faith in God as a condition for unity and fruitfulness. The Sinai covenant, finally, concerns the gift of the Law and the election of Israel as the instrument of salvation for all peoples.

They are themes that run entirely through the Old and New Testaments, with tensions and reformulations constantly oscillating between the universalism of God’s love for mankind, no-one excluded, and the particularism of election, united by a unifying character: the irrevocability of God’s gifts and call (*Rm 11:29*), his constant and manifold offer of communion, as Saint John Paul II said (cf. *Meeting with the Jewish Community*, Mainz, 17 November 1980, no. 3).

Let us now reflect a moment, then on the current relevance of these three themes and, in the light of them, on the value of your work.

As we have said, the covenant with Noah involves a clear reference to the relationship between humanity and creation. In the account of the flood "(cf. *Gen* 6:9), God restores hope and salvation to humanity, ravaged by hatred and violence, through the justice of the Patriarch. This justice has in itself an essential ecological dimension, "recovering and respecting the rhythms inscribed in nature by the hand of the Creator". The Noachic covenant, then, which has never failed on God's part, continues to spur us on to a fair and sober use of the planet's resources, which is a very serious concern at this time.

The second theme has as its icon the covenant of Abraham, common to the three great monotheistic religions. This too is an image of major current relevance. Indeed, as Vatican Council II teaches, in a time troubled by echoes of death and war, the common faith in a single God invites and encourages us to live as brothers. It is in this that, "summoned to the same destiny, human and divine, we can and we should work together without violence and deceit in order to build up the world in genuine peace" (Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 92).

Finally, the third theme is that of the gift of the law and the election of the people of Israel. This too is important. Indeed, in the Bible, against any temptation of an exclusivist reading, the particularism of election is always in function of a universal good and never falls into forms of separation or exclusion. God never chooses someone to exclude others, but always to include everyone. God's election always has this social and missionary dimension. It is an important warning for our times, in which ever-increasing tendencies towards separation dig ditches and build fences between persons and between peoples, to the detriment of the unity of the human race, which suffers, and of the Body of Christ itself, according to God's plan.

However, this meeting of yours recalls yet another value I wish to emphasize: that of working *together* in the service of the Word. Indeed, it is part of a wide-ranging effort of cooperation that the *Biblical Association* offers to the Church in Italy on a permanent basis. It was one of the first theological associations in this country, and is still very present in the various dioceses, especially through the animation of diocesan Bible weeks, which it supports in collaboration with the Biblical Apostolate of the Italian Bishops' Conference. I hope that this presence will grow throughout the territory, avoiding all forms of elitism and preclusion. The Biblical Association also works in collaboration with the Pontifical Biblical Institute, at a decisive moment for the reform of the pontifical universities, where the alliance between academic institutions is not always easy. However, for many of the Association's members, the Pontifical Biblical Institute remains the "alma mater" that nurtured them for research and the apostolate. And this offers an example of the synergy that urgently needs to be fostered, in Rome and elsewhere, between the various institutes of study, not least so as not to run the risk of irreparable extinction.

Dear friends, go forth in your mission to help God's people to feed on the Word, so that the Bible may increasingly be the heritage of all: "the book of the Lord's people, who in listening to it, move from dispersion and division towards unity" (Apostolic Letter *Aperuit illis*, 4). This is somewhat "the dynamic of the Lord": he sends and thus seems to disperse, but then gathers in unity. I bless you from my heart. And please do not forget to pray for me! Thank you.
