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General audience: ignoring human suffering means ignoring God

Vatican City, 27 April 2016 – The parable of the Good Samaritan was the subject of Pope Francis' catechesis during this Wednesday's general audience, held in St. Peter's Square and attended by more than 25,000 people.

The Gospel of St. Luke narrates that a doctor of the Law put Jesus to the test by asking Him what he has to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus asks him to answer the question himself, and he answers perfectly, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself." Jesus replies, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." But the doctor goes on to ask, "Who is my neighbour?" "And he means - my family, my compatriots? Those who share the same religion?" explained the Pope. "In short, he wants a clear rule for classifying others as neighbours and non-neighbours".

Jesus then offers him a parable whose protagonists are a priest, a Levite and a Samaritan. The first two are linked to the worship of the temple; the third is a schismatic Jew, considered as an outsider, pagan and impure. On the road from Jerusalem to Jericho the priest and the Levite encounter a dying man, who has been assaulted, robbed and abandoned by brigands. The Law of the Lord in situations of this type includes the obligation to assist, but they both pass by without stopping. "Here the parable offers us a first teaching: it is not automatic that those who frequent the house of God and know His mercy know how to love their neighbour. It is not automatic. You can know all the Bible, all the liturgy, you can know all about theology, but knowledge does not transform immediately into loving. Loving is another road. It is not just intelligence, it is something else. ... The priest and the Levite see, but ignore; they look, but they do not act. But true worship does not exist if it does not translate into service to one's neighbour. Let us never forget this: faced with the suffering of so many people afflicted by hunger, violence and injustice, we cannot remain as spectators. Ignoring human suffering means ignoring God."

Instead the Samaritan, regarded with contempt, the one whom no-one would have counted on, "and who also had his commitments and things to do, when he saw the wounded man, did not pass by like the other two, but instead acted with compassion. Here is the difference", emphasised Francis. "The other two saw, but their hearts remained closed and cold. Instead, the heart of the Samaritan was harmonised with the heart of God Himself. Indeed, compassion is an essential characteristic of God's mercy. ... God has compassion for us; that is, He suffers with us. He feels our suffering. ... Compassion means sharing with ... and in the gestures and the

actions of the Good Samaritan we recognise God's merciful action in the history of salvation. The same compassion with which the Lord comes towards each one of us. He does not ignore us; He knows our pain, He knows how much we need help and consolation ... and He never abandons us."

The Samaritan acts with true mercy: he dresses the man's wounds, he takes him to an inn, and he takes care of him. "All this teaches us that compassion, love, is not a vague sentiment, but rather means taking care of the other to the extent of paying in person", remarked the Holy Father. "It means compromising, taking all the steps necessary to be close to the other, to the point of identifying with him: love your neighbour as yourself."

At the end of the parable, Jesus asks the doctor of the Law, "Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?" The answer was finally clear: "The one who showed him mercy." At the beginning of the parable, for the priest and the Levite the neighbour was dying; at the end the neighbour is the Samaritan who tended to him. "Jesus turns the perspective around: it is not a case of classifying others to see who is a neighbour and who is not. You can become a neighbour to whoever you meet who is in need, and you will know if there is compassion in your heart."

"This parable is a wonderful gift for all of us, and also a commitment. To each one of us, Jesus repeats what He said to the doctor of the Law: 'You go, and do likewise.' We are all called to follow the same path as the good Samaritan, who is the figure of Christ: Jesus stoops to us, He makes Himself our servant, and in this way He saved us so that we too can love each other as He loved us."
