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General audience: without prayer, faith falters

Vatican City, 25 May 2016 – The need to pray always, without fail, as prayer maintains faith and the relationship with God, was the theme of the Holy Father's catechesis during this week's Wednesday general audience in St. Peter's Square. To explain this, he referred to the parable of the widow and the judge, narrated in the Gospel of St. Luke.

Widows, orphans and foreigners were among the weakest groups in society. The rights accorded to them by the Law were easily disregarded since, as these people were often alone and defenceless, they struggled to make their voices heard. According to biblical tradition, judges were supposed to be God-fearing men, impartial and incorruptible. However, the judge the widow addressed in the parable was unscrupulous and "neither feared God nor respected man". The woman's only weapon was her persistence in troubling a high-ranking figure to make him listen to her, and eventually she succeeded. In the end, the judge granted her wish, not because he was moved by mercy nor because his conscience impelled him, but simply "because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming".

"From this parable, Jesus draws a dual conclusion", explained Pope Francis. "If the widow succeeded to bend the dishonest judge to her insistent requests, then will not God, a good and just Father, 'give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?'. Therefore, Jesus urges us to pray tirelessly. We all experience moments of fatigue and discouragement, especially when our prayers seem in vain. But Jesus assures us that, unlike the dishonest judge, God responds to His children, even though this does not mean that He does so as and when we wish. Prayer is not a magic wand! It helps to keep faith in God and to trust in Him, even when we do not comprehend His will.

Jesus too, Who prayed much, offers us an example, as affirmed by St. Paul in his Letter to the Hebrews, in which he recalls that "in the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to Him Who was able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverence". "The Letter to the Hebrews makes no mistake", the Pope observed. "God saves Jesus from death, granting Him full victory over it, but the path He travels to obtain it passes through death itself." The night before His death Jesus also pleads to the Father in Gethsemane to free Him from the bitter chalice of His passion, but His prayer is suffused with trust in the will of the Almighty: "not as I will, but as You will". The object of prayer is relegated to second place, as "the most important thing is the relationship with the Father. This is what prayer does: it transforms

desire and models it according to God's will, whatever that may be, so that whoever prays aspires first of all to union with God, Who is merciful love."

The parable ends with a question: "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?". "And with this question, we are all warned: we must not desist in our prayer, even if it is not answered. It is prayer that conserves faith, and without it faith falters. Let us ask the Lord for a faith that is incessant, persistent prayer, like that of the widow in the parable, a faith that is nurtured with the desire of His coming. And in prayer, let us experience the compassion of God, Who like a Father comes towards His children, full of merciful love."
