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OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE



BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 161019a

Wednesday 19.10.2016

General audience: Our relationship with God passes through feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty

As announced last week, Pope Francis has started a new cycle of catechesis dedicated to the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. In this morning's general audience held in St. Peter's Square he spoke about the first two: feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty.

"One of the consequences of so-called wellbeing is that it leads people to be wrapped up in themselves, making them insensitive to the needs of others", Francis began. "We do everything to create ephemeral models of life, that disappear after a year or so, as if our life were a fashion to follow and change every season. But it is not like that. Reality must be accepted and faced for what it is, and often it brings us into contact with situations of urgent need. This is why, among the works of mercy, we encounter hunger and thirst: feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty. How often the media inform us of populations that suffer from the lack of food and water, with grave consequences especially for children".

He went on to comment that certain news and images in particular can affect public opinion and from time to time aid campaigns are initiated to stimulate solidarity to alleviate the suffering of many people. "This form of charity is important, but perhaps it does not involve us directly. Instead, when on the street we encounter someone in need, or when a poor person knocks on our door, it is very different, because we are no longer faced with an image but instead involved first-hand. There is no longer any distance between me and him or her, and I am challenged by this. Poverty in the abstract does not challenge us: it makes us think, it makes us complain; but when we see poverty in the flesh of a man, a woman or a child, this challenges us. And therefore, this habit we have of avoiding the needy, of not being close to them, tends to mask reality. ... There is no longer any distance between myself and the poor when we encounter each other. In these cases, what is my reaction? Do I turn my head and pass on by? Or do I stop and speak, and take an interest in his or her condition? If I do, there will certainly be someone who says, 'He is mad, because he speaks to a poor person!'. Do I see if I can in some way help this person, or do I try to get away as soon as possible? But perhaps he or she asks only for what is necessary: something to eat or drink. Let us think for a moment: how often we recite the Lord's Prayer, without truly paying attention to those words, 'Give us this day our daily bread'".

"In the Bible", the Pope explained, "a Psalm says that God is 'He Who gives food to all flesh'. The experience of hunger is tough. Anyone who has experienced periods of war or famine knows this. Yet this experience is

repeated every day, and exists alongside abundance and waste. The words of the apostle James remain valid: 'What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, Go in peace, be warmed and filled, without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead', as it is unable to work, to be charitable, to love. There is always someone who is hungry and thirsty, and in need of me. We cannot delegate someone else. This poor person needs me, my help, my word, my effort. We are all involved in this".

There is also the teaching of the Gospel in which Jesus, seeing many people who had been following Him for hours, asked His disciples, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" And the disciples answered that it was impossible and that it would be better to take leave of the crowd. But Jesus told them to feed the people themselves, and took the few loaves and fish they had with them, blessed them, and divided them to distribute among the people. "It is a very important lesson for us. It tells us that the little we have, if entrusted to the hands of Jesus and shared it with faith, becomes a superabundant wealth".

Finally, the Holy Father quoted Benedict XVI, in his encyclical *Caritas in veritate*: "Feed the hungry (cf. Mt 25: 35, 37, 42) is an ethical imperative for the universal Church. ... The right to food, like the right to water, has an important place within the pursuit of other rights. ... It is therefore necessary to cultivate a public conscience that considers food and access to water as universal rights of all human beings, without distinction or discrimination". Let us not forget Jesus' words: 'I am the bread of life', and 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink'. These are for all believers a provocation and recognition that, our relationship with God – a God Who has revealed His face of mercy in Jesus – passes through feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty".
