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General audience: new cycle of catechesis on Christian hope

Pope Francis today began a new series of catechesis on the theme of Christian hope. "It is very important, because hope never disappoints", he said to those attending the general audience in the Paul VI Hall. "Optimism disappoints, but hope does not; and we have a great need for it, in these times that appear bleak, in which at times we feel lost when faced with the evil and the violence that surround us, before the suffering of so many of our brothers. We need hope. We feel lost and somewhat discouraged, as we find ourselves helpless to act and it seems that this darkness will never end".

"But we should not abandon hope, because God, with His love, walks with us. I hope, because God is by my side: this we can all say. Each one of us can say, I hope, I have hope, because God walks with me. He walks and He leads me by the hand. God never leaves us alone. The Lord Jesus defeated evil and opens up the road of life to us. And so, especially in this time of Advent, that is the time of waiting, in which we prepare to receive once more the consoling mystery of the Incarnation and the light of Christmas, it is important to reflect on hope", he affirmed, going on to cite the words of the prophet Isaiah, the great messenger of hope, who in the second part of his book says:

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

and cry to her

that her warfare is ended,

that her iniquity is pardoned,

that she has received from the Lord's hand

double for all her sins.

A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;

make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up,

and every mountain and hill be made low;

the uneven ground shall become level,

and the rough places a plain.

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,

and all flesh shall see it together,

for the mouth of the Lord has spoken”.

“God the Father consoles by inspiring consolers, whom He asks to reassure the people, His children, announcing that their tribulations are over, their suffering is over, and sin has been forgiven. It is this that heals the afflicted and fearful heart. This is why the prophet asks us to prepare the way for the Lord, opening up to His gifts of salvation”.

The consolation to which Isaiah refers is destined for the Israelites, living the tragedy of exile in Babylon, and the prophet tells them that they now have the chance to walk “on the path of God, a new way, straightened and accessible, a way that is to be prepared through the desert, so they can cross it and return to their homeland”. This time the road will be “comfortable and wide, without valleys and mountains that make the journey arduous, a road levelled in the desert. To prepare this way means, therefore, preparing a journey of salvation and liberation from every obstacle and hindrance”.

Exile, Francis remarked, was a dramatic moment in the history of Israel, when the people had lost everything: the homeland, freedom, dignity, and even trust in God. They felt abandoned and without hope. Instead, here is the call of the prophet, who reopens the heart to faith. The desert is a place in which it is difficult to live, but it is precisely there that one can now walk to return not only to the homeland, but to return to God, and to begin to hope and smile again. “When we are in the dark and in difficulties, we do not smile”, he observed. “It is hope that teaches us to smile so as to find that road that leads to God. One of the first things that happens to those who drift away from God is that they are people without a smile. Perhaps they are capable of great laughter ... a joke, a laugh ... but the smile is missing. The smile gives only hope: it is the smile of the hope of finding God. Life is often a desert: it is difficult to journey through it, but if we entrust ourselves to God it can become beautiful and wide as a highway. It is enough never to lose hope; it is enough to continue to believe, always, in spite of everything”.

These very words of Isaiah’s were then used by John the Baptist in his preaching that invited conversion: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight”. It is a voice that cries where it seems that no-one can hear, and that cries out in the bewilderment caused by the loss of faith. We cannot deny that today’s world is experiencing a crisis of faith. We say, ‘I believe in God, I am Christian’, ‘I am of that religion...’. But your life is far from Christian being, it is far from God! Religion, faith has been reduced to the expression, ‘Do I believe?’ – ‘Yes!’. But here it is about returning to God, converting the heart to God and going along this road to find Him. He awaits us. This is what John the Baptist preaches: prepare. Prepare for the encounter with this Child who will restore our smile”.

When the Baptist announces the coming of Jesus, the Israelites already feel that they are in exile, as they are under Roman rule, which renders them foreigners in their own country, governed by powerful occupiers who decide on their lives. “But the true story is not that made by the powerful”, emphasised the Pope, “but rather that made by God together with His little people. Those little and simple people we find around Jesus as He is born: Zaccharia and Elizabeth, elderly and marked by infertility; Mary, a young virgin betrothed to Joseph; the shepherds, who are despised and count for nothing. They are the little people, made great by their faith, the little ones who continue to hope. And hope is the virtue of the small ones. The great, the satisfied do not know hope; they do not know what it is”.

“It is they, God’s little ones, who transform the wilderness of exile, of desperate solitude, of suffering, into a level road on which they can walk to encounter the glory of the Lord. Let us therefore allow ourselves to be taught how to hope, let us await trustfully the coming of the Lord, and whatever the desert of our life may be, it will become a flourishing garden. Hope never disappoints!” exclaimed the Pope at the end of his catechesis, inviting those attending the audience to repeat this phrase in unison.
