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General audience

This morning's general audience, the first of the year 2017, took place at 9.45 a.m. in the Paul VI Hall, where the Holy Father Francis met with groups of pilgrims and faithful from Italy and from throughout the world.

In his address in Italian the Pope, continuing his new cycle of catechesis on the theme of Christian hope, focused his reflection on "*Rachel is weeping for her children ... but there is hope for your future* (cf. Jer 31, 15-17).

After summarising his catechesis in various languages, the Holy Father addressed specific greetings to the groups of faithful present. He then invited prayer for the massacre in the prison of Manaus in Brazil.

The General Audience concluded with the recital of the *Pater Noster* and the Apostolic Blessing.

The Holy Father's catechesis

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In today's catechesis I would like to contemplate with you a woman who speaks to us about hope lived in tears. Hope lived in tears. She is Rachel, the wife of Jacob and the mother of Joseph and Benjamin; she who, as the Book of Genesis narrates, dies in giving birth to her second son, Benjamin.

The prophet Jeremiah refers to Rachel, addressing the Israelites in exile to console them with words full of emotion and poetry; that is, they show us Rachel's tears but give hope:

"Thus says the Lord
A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and weeping.

Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more”.

In these verses, Jeremiah presents this woman of her people, the great matriarch of her tribe, in a situation of pain and tears, but together with a prospect of unimagined life. Rachel, who in the Genesis account died in childbirth and had accepted that death so that her son could live, now instead, represented by the prophet as alive in Ramah, there where the deported were rounded up, weeps for her children who in a certain sense died going into exile: children who, as she herself says, “are no more”, have disappeared for ever.

And this is why Rachel will not be consoled. This refusal of hers expresses the depth of her pain and the bitterness of her tears. Faced with the tragedy of the loss of her children, a mother cannot accept words or gestures of consolation, which are always inadequate and never able to alleviate the pain of a wound that cannot and will not heal. A pain proportionate to love.

Every mother knows all this; and today too there are many mothers who weep, who do not resign themselves to the loss of a child, inconsolable in the face of a death that is impossible to accept. Rachel encompasses the pain of all the mothers in the world, of every time, and the tears of every human being who mourns irreparable losses.

This, Rachel’s refusal to be consoled, teaches us also how much gentleness is asked of us when faced with the suffering of others. To speak about hope to the desperate, we must share their desperation; to dry a tear from the face of one who suffers, we must unite his tears with our own. Only in this way will our words be truly capable of giving a little hope. And if I cannot say words like this, with tears, with suffering, then silence is better; a caress, a gesture, and no words.

And God, with His gentleness and His love, responds to Rachel’s tears with true words, not false ones; indeed, Jeremiah’s text continues:

“Thus says the Lord:
‘Keep your voice from weeping,
and your eyes from tears,
for there is a reward for your work,
declares the Lord,
and they shall come back from the land of the enemy.
There is hope for your future,
declares the Lord,
and your children shall come back to their own country”.

Precisely because of the tears of the mother, there is still hope for the children, who will return to life. This woman, who had accepted death, at the moment of childbirth, so that her son could live, is with her tears now the beginning of new life for the exiled children, prisoners, far from their homeland. The Lord responds to the pain and bitter tears of Rachel with a promise that can now be for her a cause for true consolation: her people will be able to return from exile and live in faith, free, their proper relationship with God. Her tears have given rise to hope. And this is not easy to understand, but it is true. Many times, in our life, tears sow hope: they are seeds of hope.

As we know, this text of Jeremiah is then reprised by the evangelist Matthew and applied to the massacre of the innocents (cf. 2, 16-18). A text that places before us the tragedy of the killing of helpless human beings, the horror of power that disregards and suppresses life. The children of Bethlehem die because of Jesus. And He, innocent Lamb, would then die too, in turn, for all of us. The Son of God entered into the pain of man. We must not forget this. When someone addresses me with difficult questions, for example, ‘Tell me, Father, why do children suffer?’, truly I do not know how to reply. I say only, ‘Look at the Crucified: God gave us His Son, He suffered, and perhaps there you will find an answer’. But there are no answers from here [indicates the head]. Only by looking to the love of God Who gave His Son, Who offers His life for us, can we see a path of

consolation. And for this reason we say that the Son of God entered into the pain of man, that He shared in it and accepted death. His Word is definitely the word of consolation, because it is born of tears.

And on the Cross He, the dying Son, will give new fruitfulness to this mother, entrusting to her the disciple John and making her mother of the believing people. Death is vanquished, and Jeremiah's prophesy is fulfilled. Mary's tears too, like those of Rachel, have generated hope and new life. Thank you.
