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General Audience

Catechesis of the Holy Father

Greetings in various languages

This morning's General Audience took place at 9.35 a.m. in the Paul VI Hall, where the Holy Father Francis met with groups of pilgrims and faithful from Italy and all over the world.

In his address in Italian the Pope continued his new cycle of catechesis, focusing on the introductory rites of the Holy Mass.

After summarising his catechesis in several languages, the Holy Father addressed special greetings to the groups of faithful present.

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

Catechesis of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today I would like to enter into the heart of the Eucharistic celebration. The Mass is composed of two parts, which are the Liturgy of the Word and the Eucharistic Liturgy, so closely joined together to form a single act of worship (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 56, *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 28). Introduced by some preparatory rites and concluded by others, the celebration is therefore a single body and can not be separated, but for a better understanding I will try to explain its various moments, each of which is able to touch and involve

a dimension of our humanity. It is necessary to know these holy signs to live the Mass fully and to savour all its beauty.

When the people are gathered, the celebration opens with introductory rites, including the entry of the celebrants or the celebrant, the greeting – “The Lord be with you”, “Peace be with you” –, the penitential act – “I confess”, where we ask forgiveness of our sins –, the *Kyrie eleison*, the hymn of *Glory* and the offertory prayer: it is called “offertory prayer” not because there is a collection of offers, but rather because it is a collection of prayer intentions of all peoples; and that collection of the intentions of the people rises to heaven as a prayer. The purpose – of these introductory rites – is to “to ensure that the faithful, who come together as one, establish communion and dispose themselves properly to listen to the Word of God and to celebrate the Eucharist worthily” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 46). It is not a good habit to look at the clock and say: “I am in time, I’ll arrive after the sermon and so I will perform the precept”. The Mass begins with the sign of the Cross, with these introductory rites, because we begin to adore God as a community. And for this it is important to take care not to arrive late, but rather in advance, to prepare the heart for this rite, for this celebration of the community.

While the entrance hymn usually takes place, the priest with the other ministers reaches the presbytery in procession, and here he greets the altar with a bow and, as a sign of veneration, he kisses it and, when there is incense, he incenses it. Why? Because the altar is Christ: it is a figure of Christ. When we look at the altar, we look at where Christ is. The altar is Christ. These gestures, which risk going unnoticed, are very significant, as they express from the beginning that the Mass is a meeting of love with Christ, Who “by the oblation of His Body, He brought the sacrifices of old to fulfilment in the reality of the Cross and [...] showed Himself the Priest, the Altar and the Lamb of sacrifice”(Preface of Easter V). Indeed, the altar, as a sign of Christ, “the centre of the thanksgiving that is accomplished through the Eucharist” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 296), and the whole community around the altar, which is Christ; not to look at one’s face, but to look at Christ, because Christ is at the centre of the community, He is not far from it.

Then there is the *sign of the cross*. The presiding priest traces it on himself and all the members of the assembly, aware that the liturgical act is “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”. And here I move on to another very small subject. Have you seen how children make the sign of the cross? They do not know what they are doing: sometimes they make a drawing, which is not the sign of the cross. Please: mums and dads, grandparents, teach children, from the beginning – from when they are very little – to make the sign of the cross well. And explain to them that it means having as protection the cross of Jesus. And the Mass begins with the sign of the cross. All prayer moves, so to speak, in the space of the Most Holy Trinity – “In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” – which is a space of infinite communion; it has as its origin and end the love of the One and Triune God, manifested and given to us in the Cross of Christ. Indeed, His paschal mystery is a gift of the Trinity, and the Eucharist always flows from His pierced heart. Marking ourselves with the sign of the cross, therefore, we not only remember our Baptism, but we affirm that liturgical prayer is the encounter with God in Christ Jesus, who for us became flesh, died on the cross and rose gloriously.

The priest then gives the *liturgical greeting*, with the expression: “The Lord be with you” or another similar one – there are several – and the assembly answers: “And with your spirit”. We are in dialogue; we are at the beginning of the Mass and we must think about the meaning of all these gestures and words. We are entering a “symphony”, in which various tones of voices resonate, including times of silence, with a view to creating “accord” between all the participants, that is to say that they are motivated by a single Spirit and for the same end. In effect, the greeting of the priest “signifies the presence of the Lord to the assembled community” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 50). In this way the common faith and mutual desire to stay with the Lord and to live unity with all the community are expressed.

And this is a prayerful symphony which is created and immediately presents a very touching moment, because the presiding priest invites all those present to acknowledge their own sins. We are all sinners. I don’t know, perhaps one of you is not a sinner ... If someone is not a sinner, please raise your hand, so we can all see. But there are no hands raised; good, you have good faith! We are all sinners, and therefore we begin the Mass by asking for forgiveness. It is the *penitential act*. It is not just about thinking of the sins we have committed, but much more; it is the invitation to confess ourselves as sinners before God and before the community, before our

brothers, with humility and sincerity, like the publican at the temple. If truly the Eucharist makes present the paschal mystery, that is to say, the passage of Christ from death to life, then the first thing we must do is acknowledge what our situations of death are, so as to rise again with Him to a new life. This allows us to understand how important the penitential act is. And for this reason we will resume the issue in the next catechesis.

We are going step by step through the explanation of the Mass. But remember – teach children how to make the sign of the cross well, please!

Greetings in various languages

French

I am glad to welcome French-speaking pilgrims. Dear friends, on the eve of the celebrations of the Nativity of the Lord, I invite you to open your hearts to the Child of Bethlehem to welcome the love that God has for each one of you and for all men. Happy Christmas to you all. God bless you!

English

I greet all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's audience, particularly the student groups from Australia and the United States of America. In these final days before our celebration of Christmas, I invoke upon you and your families the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

German

A warm welcome to German-speaking pilgrims. In a few days' time we will celebrate the Nativity of the Lord. I hope you will experience the presence and the closeness of God made man, Who gives us joy and peace. God bless you all.

Spanish

I cordially greet Spanish-speaking pilgrims, in particular those from Spain and Latin America. As we near the celebration of the Nativity of the Lord, I encourage you to live these days with intensity, participating in Holy Mass and experiencing the grace of the personal encounter with Christ, Who wanted to be born of a woman, Mary, to save us and to fill us with peace and joy.

Portuguese

Dearest Portuguese-speaking pilgrims, I greet you all, wishing you a personal encounter with the Saviour. In these days, we see Him lying in the manger, but it is in the Eucharist that He lets Himself be found in person. In every Mass, we prepare not only for the Nativity of God in the world, but also the birth of the human being from God. I wish a Christmas like this to each one of you and your families, whom I bless heartily.

Arabic

I cordially greet Arabic-speaking pilgrims, in particular those from Iraq, from Egypt and from the Middle East. Saint Thomas of Aquinas taught that in the sacred liturgy it is necessary to "make use of material things as signs, through which the human soul is urged to spiritual actions that join him to God" (S.Th. IIa IIae q. 81 a. 7). Dedicate yourselves to learning the meaning of every liturgical action to live fully every Eucharistic celebration, and thus to fill yourselves with its divine fruits. May the Lord bless you all and protect you from the evil one.

Polish

I give my cordial welcome to the Polish people here at this audience. In a few days' time we will live the fourth Sunday of Advent, the Eve of the Nativity of the Lord; these are the upcoming events that await us. Just as the shepherds of Bethlehem many years ago recognized the Son of God born in a stable, you too will know how to recognize Him when He comes in the mystery of the Eucharist. May Christmas Night illuminate with joy and peace the life of each one of you, your families, your loved ones and, in a special way, those who are alone, suffering or homeless. May Jesus, who was born in Bethlehem, bless you and your homeland. Jesus Christ be praised.

Italian

Dear Italian-speaking pilgrims, welcome!

I would like to thank the Cuban Circus for this good show! Thank you!

I am pleased to welcome the new priests of the Legionaries of Christ, with their Brothers and their families; the priests of the International Missionary College of Saint Joseph of Rome and the parishes of *Alvito* and of *Maria Santissima Annunziata* of Siano. I urge you all to renew your following of the poor, humble and obedient Christ, to transmit God's love and mercy in today's ecclesial context.

I greet the schools, the families of the Staff of the Italian Air Force; the delegations of the municipalities of Bolsena and Cagnano Amiterno, and the managers and artists of the Circus of Cuba.

I address a special greeting to young people, the sick and newlyweds. Dear young people, prepare yourselves for the mystery of the Nativity of the Lord with the obedience of faith and the humility that Mary had. You, dear people who are sick, draw from her that same force of love for Jesus Who comes among us. And you, dear newlyweds, contemplate the example of the Holy Family in Bethlehem, so as to practice the same virtues in your journey of family life. And after the blessing, I would like to hear this choir that sings so well!
