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General Audience

This Wednesday's general audience took place in Saint Peter's Square, where the Holy Father Francis met with groups of pilgrims and faithful from Italy and all over the world.

The Pope continued his catechesis on the Acts of the Apostles, focusing on the passage "*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock*" (Acts 20: 28). *Paul's ministry in Ephesus and his farewell to the elders* (Acts 20: 32-35).

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 recitation of the *Pater Noster* and the Apostolic Blessing.

Catechesis of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

The journey of the Gospel in the world continues unabated in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, and crosses the city of Ephesus, where it manifests all its saving power. Thanks to Paul, about twelve men receive baptism in the name of Jesus and experience the outpouring of the Holy Spirit Who regenerates them (cf. *Acts* 19: 1-7). Then there are various wonders that take place through the Apostle: the sick heal and the obsessed are freed (cf. *Acts* 19: 11-12). This is because the disciple resembles his Master (cf. *Lk* 6: 40) and makes Him present by communicating to his brothers and sisters the same new life that he received from Him.

The power of God that irrupts into Ephesus unmasks those who wish to use the name of Jesus to carry out exorcisms without having the spiritual authority to do so (cf. *Acts* 19: 13-17), and reveals the weakness of the magical arts, which are abandoned by a great number of people who choose Christ and abandon the magical arts (cf. *Acts* 19: 18-19). A real reversal for a city, like Ephesus, which was a famous centre for the practice of magic! Luke thus emphasizes the incompatibility between faith in Christ and magic. If you choose Christ you

cannot have recourse to the magician: faith is trusting abandonment into the hands of a trustworthy God Who makes Himself known not through occult practices but through revelation and with freely-give love. Perhaps some of you will say; “Ah, yes, this magic is something old: today, with Christian civilization, this does not happen”. But be careful! I ask you: how many of you go for a Tarot card reading, how many of you have your hands read by soothsayers, or have your cards read? Even today in the great cities, practicing Christians do these things. And to the question: “But why, if you believe in Jesus Christ, go to the magician, to the clairvoyant, to all these people?”, they answer: “I believe in Jesus Christ but out of superstition I also go to them”. Please: magic is not Christian! These things that are done to predict the future or foresee many things or change life situations, are not Christian. The grace of Christ brings you everything: pray and entrust yourself to the Lord.

The spread of the Gospel in Ephesus harms the trade of silversmiths, who produced statues of the goddess Artemis, turning a religious practice into a business opportunity. Seeing the decline of the activity that yielded a lot of money, the silversmiths organize an uprising against Paul, and Christians are accused of having caused a crisis for craftsmen, for the shrine to Artemis and the worship of this goddess (cf. *Acts* 19: 23-28).

Paul then departs from Ephesus to Jerusalem and arrives in Miletus (cf. *Acts* 20: 1-16). Here he calls for the elders of the Church of Ephesus – the presbyters: that is, the priests – so as to make a transfer of “pastoral” duties (cf. *Acts* 20: 17-35). We are at the final stages of Paul’s apostolic ministry, and Luke presents us with his farewell speech, a sort of spiritual testament that the Apostle addresses to those who, after his departure, will have to lead the community of Ephesus. And this is one of the most beautiful pages of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles: I advise you to take today the New Testament, the Bible, chapter 10, and to read Paul’s farewell to the presbyters of Ephesus, and he does it at Miletus. It is a way of understanding how an Apostle bids farewell, and also how priests today must take leave, and also how all Christians should take leave. It is a beautiful page.

In the part which takes the form of an exhortation, Paul encourages those in charge of the community, who know that they are seeing him for the last time. And what does he say to them? “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock”. This is the job of the pastor: to keep vigil, to watch over himself and his flock. The pastor must keep watch, the parish priest must keep vigil, keep watch, priests must keep watch, bishops, the Pope must keep watch. Keeping vigil to guard the flock, and also to keep watch over oneself, examine one’s conscience and see how one fulfils this duty to *keep vigil*. “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the Church of God, which He obtained with His own blood” (*Acts* 20: 28): this is what Saint Paul says. The *episcopi* are asked to be as close as possible to the flock, redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, and to be ready to defend it from the “wolves” (v. 29). The bishops must be very close to the people to protect them, to defend them; not detached from the populace. After entrusting this task to those responsible for Ephesus, Paul places them in the hands of God and entrusts them to the “word of His grace” (v. 32), the leaven of every growth and path of holiness in the Church, inviting them to work with their own hands, like him, so as not to be a burden on others, to help the weak and to experience that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (v. 35).

Dear brothers and sisters, let us ask the Lord to renew in us His love for the Church and for the deposit of the faith which she preserves, and to make us all co-responsible in the custody of the flock, supporting the pastors in prayer so that they may manifest the steadfastness and tenderness of the Divine Shepherd.

Greeting in English

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today’s audience, especially the groups from Malta, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Canada and the United States of America. I pray that each of you, and your families, may experience a blessed Advent, in preparation for the coming of the new-born Saviour at Christmas. May God bless you!

Greetings in various languages

Among the Polish pilgrims the Pope greeted in particular the organizers of and participants in the conference dedicated to Blessed Father Popieluszko, which took place at the Pontifical Urban University, at the opening of the exhibition dedicated to the latter: "I thank you for preserving the memory of this fervent priest and martyr who, barbarically assassinated by the communist services, gave his life for the love of Christ, the Church and men, especially those deprived of freedom and dignity"

"On Sunday in Poland the twentieth Day of Prayer and Aid to the Church in the East is celebrated", he continued. "I entrust this important task to you and I thank all Polish people committed to the neighbouring Churches in a spirit of fraternal love. May God bless you!"

In his greetings in Italian to the young, the elderly, the sick and newlyweds, the Holy Father recalled that next Friday will be the liturgical memorial of Saint Nicholas of Bari. "Let us imitate his virtues", he said, "learning not to put anything before charity for those most in need, seeking in them the face of God Who became man".
