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General Audience

This morning's general audience took place at 9.15 in the library of the Vatican Apostolic Palace.

In his address in Italian, the Pope continued his cycle of catechesis on prayer, focusing on the theme "The blessing" (Bible reading: *Eph* 1: 3-6).

After summarising his catechesis in various languages, the Holy Father addressed special greetings to the faithful. He then launched an appeal for the victims of the terrorist attack in Nigeria and recalled the fortieth anniversary of the death of four missionaries from North America, killed in El Salvador.

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!

Today we will reflect on an essential dimension of prayer: *blessing*. We are continuing the reflections on prayer. In the creation accounts (see *Gn* 1-2), God continually blesses life, always. He blesses the animals (1:22), He blesses the man and the woman (1:28), finally, He blesses the Sabbath, the day of rest and the enjoyment of all of creation (2:3). It is God who blesses. On the first pages of the Bible, there is a continual repetition of blessings. God blesses, but men give blessings as well, and soon they discover that the blessing possesses a special power that accompanies the person who receives it throughout his or her entire life, and disposes the person's heart to allow God to change it (see Second Vatican Council Const. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 61).

At the world's beginning, therefore, there is a God who "speaks well", who blesses. He sees that every work of His hands is good and beautiful, and when He creates man, and creation is complete, He recognises that he is "very good" (*Gn* 1:31). Shortly thereafter, the beauty that God had imprinted within His work will be altered, and

the human being will become a degenerate creature, capable of spreading evil and death in the world; but nothing will ever take away God's original imprint of goodness that God placed in the world, in human nature, in all of us: the capacity of blessing and of being blessed. God did not make a mistake with creation nor with the creation of man. The *hope of the world* lies entirely in *God's blessing*: He continues to *desire our good*, He is the first, as the poet Péguy said, to continue to hope for our good.

God's greatest blessing is Jesus Christ; His Son is God's greatest. He is a blessing for all of humanity, He is the blessing that saved us all. He is the eternal Word with which the Father blessed us "while we were yet sinners" (Rm 5:8), St Paul says: the Word made flesh and offered for us on the cross.

St Paul proclaims with emotion God's plan of love. And he says it this way: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved" (Eph 1:3-6). There is no sin that can completely erase the image of Christ present in each one of us. No sin can erase that image that God has given us – the image of Christ. Sin can disfigure it, but not remove it from God's mercy. A sinner can remain in error for a long time, but God is patient till the end, hoping that the sinner's heart will eventually open and change. God is like a good father, He is a Father, and like a good mother, He is a good mother as well: they never stop loving their child, no matter what he or she may have done wrong, always. What comes to my mind is the many times that I have seen people in line to go into a prison, how many mothers are there in line to see their imprisoned child. They do not cease to love their child and they know that the people passing by on the bus are thinking: "Ah, that is the mother of a prisoner..." They are not embarrassed about this. Yes, they are embarrassed but they go ahead. Just as their child is more important than their embarrassment, so we are more important to God than all of the sins that we can commit. Because He is a Father, He is a Mother, He is pure love, He has blessed us forever. And He will never cease blessing us.

What an impressive experience it is to read these biblical texts of blessing in a prison, or in a rehabilitation group. To allow these people to hear that they are still blessed, notwithstanding their grave errors, that the heavenly Father continues to desire their good and to hope that they will open themselves in the end to the good. Even if their closest relatives have abandoned them – many abandon them, they are not like those mothers who wait in life to see them, they are not important, they abandon them – they have abandoned them since they by now judge them to be irredeemable, they are always children to God. God cannot erase in us the image of sons and daughters, each one of us is His son, His daughter. At times we see miracles happen: men and women who are reborn because they find this blessing that has anointed them as children. For God's grace changes lives: He takes us as we are, but He never leaves us as we are.

Let us think about what Jesus did with Zacchaeus (see Lk 19:1-10), for example. Everyone saw evil in him; instead, Jesus spots a glimmer of good, and from that – from his curiosity to see Jesus – He allows the mercy that saves to pass through. Thus, first Zacchaeus's heart was changed, and then his life. Jesus sees the indelible blessing of the Father in the people who are rejected and repudiated. He was a public sinner, he had done so many awful things, but Jesus saw that indelible sign of the Father's blessing and because of that, He had compassion. That phrase that is repeated often in the Gospel, "He was moved with compassion", and that compassion leads Him to help him and to change his heart. What's more, Jesus came to identify Himself with every person in need (see Mt 25:31-46). In the passage about the final protocol on which all of us will be judged, Matthew 25, Jesus says: "I was there, I was hungry, I was naked, I was in prison, I was in hospital, I was there".

To the God who blesses we, too, respond by *blessing* – God has taught us how to bless and we must bless – through the prayer of *praise*, of *adoration*, of *thanksgiving*. The *Catechism* writes: "The prayer of blessing is man's response to God's gifts: because God blesses, the human heart can in return bless the One who is the source of every blessing" (n. 2626). Prayer is joy and thanksgiving. God did not wait for us to convert ourselves before beginning to love us, but He loved us a long time before, when we were still in sin.

We cannot but bless this God who blesses us; we must bless everyone in Him, all people, to bless God and to

bless our brothers and sisters, to bless the world – and this is the root of Christian meekness, the ability of feeling blessed and the ability to bless. If all of us were to do this, wars would surely not exist. This world needs blessings, and we can give blessings and receive blessings. The Father loves us. The only thing that remains for us is the joy of blessing Him, and the joy of thanking Him, and of learning from Him not to curse, but to bless. Here, just one word for the people who have the habit of cursing, people who always have a bad word, a curse, on their lips and in their hearts. Each one of us can think: Do I have this habit of cursing like this? And ask the Lord the grace to change this habit because we have a blessed heart and curses cannot come out of a heart that has been blessed. May the Lord teach us never to curse, but to bless.

Appeal of the Holy Father

I want to assure my prayers for Nigeria, where blood has unfortunately been spilled once more in a terrorist attack. Last Saturday, in the northeast of the country, more than one hundred farmers were brutally killed. May God welcome them in His peace and comfort their families, and convert the hearts of those who commit similar atrocities which gravely offend His name.

Today is the fortieth anniversary of the death of four North American missionaries killed in El Salvador: the Maryknoll Sisters Ita Ford and Maura Clarke, Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel and the volunteer Jean Donovan. On 2 December 1980, they were kidnapped, raped and assassinated by a paramilitary group. They were serving in El Salvador within the context of the civil war. With evangelical dedication, and running great risks, they were bringing food and medication to the displaced and were helping poorer families. These women lived their faith with great generosity. They are an example for everyone to become faithful missionary disciples.
