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The Pope's words at the Angelus prayer

At midday today the Holy Father Francis appeared at the window of his study in the Vatican Apostolic Palace to pray the Angelus with the faithful and pilgrims gathered in Saint Peter's Square.

The following is the Pope's introduction to the Marian prayer:

Before the Angelus

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

This Sunday's Gospel passage (Mk 1:1-8) introduces the person and work of John the Baptist. He reveals to his contemporaries an itinerary of faith similar to the one that Advent proposes to us: that we prepare ourselves to receive the Lord at Christmas. This itinerary of faith is an itinerary of *conversion*. What does the word 'conversion' mean? In the Bible it means, first and foremost, to change direction and orientation; and thus also to change one's way of thinking. In the moral and spiritual life, to convert means to turn oneself from evil to good, from sin to love of God. And this is what the Baptist was teaching, who in the desert of Judea was "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v. 4). Receiving baptism was an outward and visible sign of the conversion of those who had listened to his preaching and decided to repent. That baptism occurred with immersion in the Jordan, in water, but it proved worthless; it was only a sign and it was worthless if there was no willingness to repent and change one's life.

Conversion involves sorrow for sins committed, the desire to be free from them, the intention to exclude them from one's own life forever. To exclude sin it is also necessary to reject everything that is connected to sin; the things that are connected to sin and that need to be rejected – a worldly mentality, excessive esteem for comforts, excessive esteem for pleasure, for well-being, for wealth. The example illustrating this comes to us once again from today's Gospel in the person of John the Baptist: an austere man who renounces excess and seeks the essential. This is the first aspect of conversion: *detachment from sin and worldliness*: Commencing a journey of detachment from these things.

The other aspect of conversion is the the aim of the journey, that is, the *search for God and his kingdom*. Detachment from worldly things and seeking God and his kingdom. Abandoning comforts and a worldly mentality is not an end in itself; it is not an asceticism only to do penance: a Christian is not a “fakir”. It is something else. Detachment is not an end in itself, but is a means of attaining something greater, namely, the kingdom of God, communion with God, friendship with God. But this is not easy, because there are many ties that bind us closely to sin; it is not easy.... Temptation always pulls down, pulls down, and thus the ties that keep us close to sin: inconstancy, discouragement, malice, unwholesome environments, bad examples. At times the yearning we feel toward the Lord is too weak and it almost seems that God is silent; his promises of consolation seem far away and unreal to us, like the image of the caring and attentive shepherd, which resounds today in the reading from Isaiah (40:1, 11). And so one is tempted to say that it is impossible to truly convert. How often we have heard this discouragement! “No, I can't do it. I barely start and then I turn back”. And this is bad. But it is possible. It is possible. When you have this discouraging thought, do not remain there, because this is quicksand. It is quicksand: the quicksand of a mediocre existence. This is mediocrity. What can we do in these cases, when one would like to go but feels he or she cannot do it? First of all, remind ourselves that conversion *is a grace*: no one can convert by his or own strength. It is a grace that the Lord gives you, and thus we need to forcefully ask God for it. To ask God to convert us to the degree in which we open ourselves up to the beauty, the goodness, the tenderness of God. Think about God's tenderness. God is not a bad father, an unkind father, no. He is tender. He loves us so much, like the Good Shepherd, who searches for the last member of his flock. It is love, and this is conversion: a grace of God. You begin to walk, because it is he who moves you to walk, and you will see how he will arrive. Pray, walk, and you will always take a step forward.

May Mary Most Holy, whom we will celebrate the day after tomorrow as the Immaculate Conception, help us to separate ourselves more and more from sin and worldliness, in order to open ourselves to God, to his Word, to his love which restores and saves.

After the Angelus

Dear brothers and sisters, I wholeheartedly greet all of you present here – with this bad weather, you are courageous – people of Rome and pilgrims, and those who are connected through the media.

As you see, in the Square the Christmas tree has been raised and the Nativity scene is being set up. In these days, also in many homes these two signs of Christmas are being prepared, to the delight of children ... and adults too! They are signs of hope, especially in this difficult time. Let us be sure we do not stop with the sign, but get to the meaning, that is, to Jesus, to the love of God that he revealed to us; get to the infinite goodness that he made shine on the world. There is no pandemic, there is no crisis that can extinguish this light. Let us allow it to enter our heart, and let us lend a hand to those who need it most. In this way God will be born anew in us and among us.

I wish everyone a happy Sunday. Please, do not forget to pray for me. Enjoy your lunch. *Arrivederci!*
