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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 of "Prayer of intercession" (Bible reading: *Eph* 6: 18-20).

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

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!

Those who pray never turn their backs on the world. If prayer does not gather the joys and sorrows, the hopes and the anxieties of humanity, it becomes a "decorative" activity, a superficial, theatrical, solitary way of behaving. We all need interiority: to retreat within a space and a time dedicated to our relationship with God. But this does not mean that we evade reality. In prayer, God "takes us, blesses us, then breaks us and gives us", to satisfy everyone's hunger. Every Christian is called to become in God's hands bread, broken and shared. That is, it is concrete prayer, that is not an escape.

So, men and women of prayer seek solitude and silence, not so as not to be disturbed, but so as to listen better to God's voice. Sometimes they withdraw from the world altogether, in the secret of their own room, as Jesus recommended (see *Mt* 6:6). But wherever they are, they always keep the doors of their hearts wide open: an open door for those who pray without knowing how to pray; for those who do not pray at all but who carry within themselves a suffocating cry, a hidden invocation; for those who have erred and have lost the way.... Whoever

can knock on the door of someone who prays finds a compassionate heart which does not exclude anyone. Prayer comes from our hearts and our voices and gives heart and voice to so many people do not know how to pray or who do not want to pray or for whom it is impossible to pray: we are the heart and the voice of these people, rising to Jesus, rising to the Father as intercessors. In the solitude of those who pray, whether the solitude lasts a long time or only a half hour, to pray, those who pray separate themselves from everything and from everyone to find everything and everyone in God. These people pray for the whole world, bearing its sorrows and sins on their shoulders. They pray for each and every person: they are like God's "antennas" in this world. The one who prays sees the face of Christ in every poor person who knocks at the door, in every person who has lost the meaning of things. In the *Catechism* we read: "intercession - asking on behalf of another (...) has been characteristic of a heart attuned to God's mercy". This is beautiful. When we pray we are in tune with God's mercy; having mercy regarding our sins, being merciful with ourselves, but also merciful with all those who have asked to be prayed for, those for whom we want to pray in tune with God's heart. This is true prayer: in tune with God's mercy, with His merciful heart. "In the age of the Church, Christian intercession participates in Christ's, as an expression of the communion of saints" (n. 2635). What does it mean to participate in Christ's intercession? When I intercede for someone or pray for someone: because Christ is before the Father He is the intercessor, He prays for us, He prays showing the Father the wounds of His hands because Jesus is physically present before the Father with His body. And Jesus is our intercessor and to pray is to be a bit like Jesus: to intercede in Jesus to the Father, for others. This is very beautiful.

The human heart tends toward prayer. It is simply human. Those who do not love their brother or sister do not pray seriously. Someone might say: one cannot pray when steeped in hatred; one cannot pray when steeped in indifference. Prayer is offered only in the spirit of love. Those who do not love pretend to pray, they believe they are praying, but they are not praying because they lack the proper spirit, which is love. In the Church, those who are familiar with the sadness and joy of others dig deeper than those who investigate the world's "chief systems". Because of this, human experience is present in every prayer, because no matter what mistakes people may have committed, they should never be rejected or set aside.

When believers, moved by the Holy Spirit, pray for sinners, no selection is made, no judgement or condemnation is uttered: they pray for everyone. And they pray for themselves. At that moment they know they are not that different from those for whom they pray. They realize they are sinners among sinners and they pray for everyone. The lesson of the parable of the Pharisee and the publican is always alive and always relevant (see *Lk* 18:9-14): we are not better than anyone, we are all brothers and sisters who bear fragility, suffering and being sinners in common. Therefore, a prayer that we can say to God is this: "Lord, no one is just in your sight" (see *Ps* 143:2), this is what one of the Psalms says: "Lord, no one who lives is just in your sight, none of us: we are all sinners - we are all in debt, each with an outstanding balance to pay; no one is without sin in Your eyes. Lord, have mercy on us!" And with this spirit, prayer is fruitful because we go humbly before God and pray for everyone. Instead, the Pharisee was praying proudly: "I thank you, Lord, because I am not like others, sinners: I am just, always always do...". This is not prayer: this is looking at yourself in a mirror, it is not looking at one's own reality, no. It is like looking at yourself made-up in a mirror because of your pride.

The world keeps going thanks to this chain of people who pray, who intercede, and who are unknown for the most part...but not unknown to God! There are many anonymous Christians who, in times of persecution, have repeated the words of our Lord: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (*Lk* 23:34).

The Good Shepherd remains faithful even before the awareness of the sin of His own people: the Good Shepherd continues to be a Father even when His children distance themselves and abandon Him. He perseveres in His service as shepherd even with those who have bloodied His hands; He does not close His heart to those who have even made Him suffer.

The Church, in all of her members, has the mission to practice the prayer of intercession: to intercede for others. This is especially so for those who exercise roles of responsibility: parents, teachers, ordained ministers, superiors of communities.... Like Abraham and Moses, they must at times "defend" the people entrusted to them before God. In reality, we are talking about protecting them with God's eyes and heart, with His same invincible compassion and tenderness. Pray with tenderness for others.

Brothers and sisters, we are all leaves on the same tree: each one that falls reminds us of the great piety that must be nourished in prayer, for one another. So let us pray for each other. It will do us good and do good for everyone. Thank you.

Greeting in English

I cordially greet the English-speaking faithful. On our Advent journey, may the light of Christ illumine our paths and dispel all darkness and fear from our hearts. Upon you and your families I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.
