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Audience with participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Biblical Commission

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, to whom he delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

I am pleased to welcome you at the end of your annual Plenary Assembly, in which you proposed to explore an existential, strongly existential theme: *sickness and suffering in the Bible*. It is a pursuit that concerns every human being, inasmuch as they are subject to infirmity, fragility, and death. Our wounded nature, in fact, also carries inscribed within itself the realities of limitation and finitude, and suffers the contradictions of evil and pain.

The theme is very close to my heart: suffering and sickness are adversaries to be confronted, but it is important to do so in a way *worthy of mankind*, in a human way, so to speak: to remove them, to reduce them to taboos of which it is best not to speak, perhaps because they damage that image of efficiency at all costs, useful to sell and to earn, is certainly not the solution. We all falter under the weight of these experiences, and we must help ourselves to go through them by living them *in relations*, without turning in on ourselves and without legitimate rebellion turning into isolation, abandonment or despair.

We know, also from the testimony of so many of our brothers and sisters, that pain and infirmity, in the light of faith, can become decisive factors in a process of maturation: the crucible of suffering allows us to discern what is essential and what is not. But it is above all the example of Jesus that shows us the way. He urges us to take care of those who live in situations of infirmity, with the determination to defeat the illness; at the same time, He delicately invites us to join our sufferings to His offer of salvation, as a seed that bears fruit. In a practical sense, our vision of has faith prompted me to propose some food for thought around two decisive words: *compassion* and *inclusion*.

The first, *compassion*, indicates the recurrent and characteristic attitude of the Lord with regard to the frail and needy people He encounters. When He sees the faces of so many people, sheep without a shepherd struggling

to find their way in life (cf. *Mk* 6:34), Jesus is moved. He has compassion towards the hungry and exhausted crowd (cf. *Mk* 8:2) and tirelessly welcomes the sick (cf. *Mk* 1:32), whose requests He hears; think of the blind people who plead with Him and the many such who ask for healing (cf. *Lk* 17:11-19); He is moved with "compassion" - the Gospel says - for the widow who accompanies her only son to the tomb (cf. *Lk* 7:13). Great compassion. This compassion manifests itself as closeness and leads Jesus to identify with the suffering: "I was sick and you visited me" (*Mt* 25:36). Compassion that leads to closeness.

All this reveals an important aspect: Jesus *does not explain* suffering, but He *leans* to those who suffer. He does not approach pain with generic encouragement and sterile consolation, but welcomes their plight, letting himself be touched by it. Sacred Scripture is enlightening in this sense: it does not leave us a handbook of good words or a recipe book of sentiments, but shows us faces, encounters, and concrete stories.

Think of Job, with the temptation of his friends to articulate religious theories linking suffering with divine punishment, but they collide with the reality of pain, witnessed by Job's own life. Thus, Jesus' response is vital, it is one of *compassion that assumes* and, by assuming, saves man and transfigures his pain. Yes, Christ transformed our pain by making it his own to the core: by inhabiting it, suffering it and offering it as a gift of love. He did not give easy answers to our "why", but on the cross he made our great "why" his own (cf. *Mk* 15:34). Thus, those who assimilate Sacred Scripture purify their religious imagery of mistaken attitudes, learning to follow the path indicated by Jesus: to touch human suffering with one's own hand, with humility, meekness and, seriousness, in order to bring, in the name of the incarnate God, the proximity of a saving and concrete support. To touch, not theoretically, but with the hand.

And this leads us to the second word: *inclusion*. Even if it is not a biblical word, it expresses well a salient feature of Jesus' style: His going in search of the sinner, the lost, the marginalized, the stigmatized, so that they may be welcomed in the house of the Father (cf. *Lk* 15). Think of the lepers: for Jesus, no-one must be excluded from God's salvation (cf. *Mk* 1:40-42). But inclusion also embraces another aspect: the Lord wants the full person to be healed, in spirit, soul and body (cf. *Thess* 5:23). For a physical healing from evil would be of little use without a healing of the heart from sin (cf. *Mk* 2:17; *Mt* 10:28-29). There is a total healing: body, soul and spirit.

This perspective of inclusion leads us to attitudes of sharing: Christ, who went among the people doing good and healing the sick, commanded His disciples to care for the sick and bless them in His name (cf. *Mt* 10:8; *Lk* 10:9), sharing with them His mission of consolation (cf. *Lk* 4:18-19). Therefore, through the experience of suffering and illness, we, as the Church, are called to walk together with all, in Christian and human solidarity, opening up opportunities for dialogue and hope in the name of our common frailty. The parable of the Good Samaritan "shows us how a community can be rebuilt by men and women who identify with the vulnerability of others, who reject the creation of a society of exclusion, and act instead as neighbours, lifting up and rehabilitating the fallen for the sake of the common good" (Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, 67).

Dear brothers and sisters – the sermon is ending, eh! – in leaving you these insights, I thank you for your service and I encourage you to explore in depth, with critical rigor and fraternal spirit, the themes you are studying, in order to shine the light of Scripture on sensitive issues that concern everyone. The Word of God is a powerful antidote to any narrowness, abstraction and ideologization of the faith: read in the Spirit in which it was written, it increases passion for God and man, fosters charity and revives apostolic zeal. Hence, the Church has a constant need to drink from the wellspring of the Word. I bless you and your mission to quench the thirst of the holy People of God with the fresh waters of the Spirit. And I ask you, please, to pray for me. For me, not against! Thank you.
