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General Audience

This Wednesday's general audience took place in the Paul VI Hall, where the Pope met with groups of pilgrims and faithful from Italy and from all over the world.

The Holy Father, resuming his catechesis on the Acts of the Apostles, chose the passage "There will be no loss of life among you" (*Acts 27: 22*). The trial of the shipwreck: from God's salvation to the hospitality of the Maltese (*Acts 27: 15-21-24*).

After summarizing his address in various languages, the Pope greeted the groups of faithful present. The general audience ended with the recitation of the *Pater Noster* and the apostolic blessing.

Catechesis of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

The book of the Acts of the Apostles, in the final part, recounts that the Gospel follows its course not only by land but also by sea, on a ship that takes Paul as a prisoner from Caesarea to Rome (cf. *Acts 27: 1-28, 16*), in the heart of the Empire, so that the word of the Risen One may be fulfilled: "You will be my witnesses ... to the end of the earth" (*Acts 1: 8*). Read the Book of the Acts of the Apostles and you will see how the Gospel, with the strength of the Holy Spirit, arrives to all peoples, and becomes universal. Take it. Read it.

The navigation encounters unfavourable conditions right from the start. The journey becomes dangerous. Paul advises not to continue the navigation, but the centurion does not take him seriously and relies on the pilot and the ship-owner. The voyage continues and a wind is unleashed that is so furious that the crew loses control and lets the ship drift.

When death appears to be near and desperation pervades all, Paul intervenes and reassures his companions,

saying what we have heard: “This very night there stood before me an angel of the God to Whom I belong and Whom I worship, and He said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you” (*Acts 27: 23-24*). Even in trial, Paul never ceases to be the *guardian of the life of others and the animator of their hope*.

Luke thus shows us that the plan that guides Paul towards Rome saves not only the apostle, but also his travelling companions; and the shipwreck transforms from a situation of misfortune to a providential opportunity for the proclamation of the Gospel.

The shipwreck is followed by the landing on the island of Malta, whose inhabitants show a caring welcome. The Maltese are good, they are meek, they were already welcoming at that time. It rains and is cold, and they light a bonfire to provide the shipwrecked crew with some warmth and relief. Here, too, Paul, as a true disciple of Christ, places himself in service to feed the fire with some branches. During these operations he is bitten by a viper but does not suffer any damage: the people, looking at this, say; “But he must be a great wrongdoer if he escapes shipwreck and ends up being bitten by a viper!” They waited for the moment in which he dropped down dead, but does not suffer any damage and is even mistaken for a deity. In reality, this benefit comes from the Risen Lord Who assists him, according to the promise made before ascending to heaven and addressed to believers: “They will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover”. (*Mk 16: 18*). The story tells us that from that moment onwards there have been no more vipers in Malta: this is God’s blessing for the welcome given by this good people.

In fact, the stay in Malta becomes for Paul a propitious occasion to give “flesh” to the word he announces and to thus exercise a ministry of compassion in the healing of the sick. This is a law of the Gospel: when a believer experiences salvation he does not keep it for himself, but puts it into circulation. “Goodness always tends to spread. Every authentic experience of truth and goodness by its very nature to grow within us, and any person who has experienced a profound liberation becomes more sensitive to the needs of others” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 9). A Christian who has suffered can certainly become closer to those who suffer, as he knows what suffering is, and make his heart open and sensitive to solidarity with others.

Paul teaches us to live through trials by staying close to Christ, in order to develop the “conviction that God is able to act in every situation, even amid apparent setbacks” and the certainty “that all those who entrust themselves to God in love will bear good fruit” (*ibid.*, 279). Love is always fruitful, God’s love is always fruitful, and if you let yourself be taken by the Lord and you receive the Lord’s gifts, this will enable you to give them to others. It always goes beyond love to God.

Let us ask the Lord today to help us to live every trial sustained by the energy of faith; and to be sensitive to the many shipwrecked people in history who come to our shores exhausted, because we too know how to welcome them with that fraternal love which comes from the encounter with Jesus. This is what saves us from the frost of indifference and inhumanity.

Greeting in English

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today’s audience, especially the groups from Australia and the United States of America. May each of you, and your families, cherish the joy of this Christmas season and draw near in prayer to the Saviour Who has come to dwell among us. May God bless you!

Greetings in other languages

In Italian, the Pope, recalling that among those present was a group from Australia, said: "I wish to ask everyone to pray to the Lord to help the people in this difficult moment, with these major fires. I am close to the people of Australia".

Addressing the young, the elderly, the sick and newlyweds, he said: "Next Sunday we will celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. Rediscover the grace that comes from the Sacrament and translate it into the daily commitments of life. And I would like each one of us to find out the date of baptism: we know the date of our birthday, the date of our birth; but how many of you know your date of baptism? Few... since it is not celebrated, it is forgotten. I will give you some homework to do at home: Ask your parents, grandparents, uncles, friends: "When was I baptized? When was I baptized?" And always carry that date of baptism in your heart to thank the Lord for the grace of baptism.
