
Pope at audience: "Let us remember Ukraine's smileless children"

"Let us remember the many children of Ukraine who suffer, who suffer so much because of this war", the Pope said in an appeal delivered at the end of the General Audience today in Paul VI Hall, during the greetings to the Italian-speaking faithful. "On this feast of God becoming a child, let us think about the Ukrainian children," Francis continued in unscripted remarks: "When I met them here, most of them did not smile, and when a child loses the ability to smile it is a serious matter. These children bear the tragedy of that inhuman, harsh war on themselves. This Christmas, let us remember the people of Ukraine: with no light, no heating, without the basic necessities to survive. Let us pray to the Lord to bring peace upon them as soon as possible." **The relationship with the Word of God as "help" for discernment was at the heart of the catechesis.** "God's voice does not impose itself; God's voice is discreet, respectful – allow me to say, God's voice is humble – and, for that reason, produces peace", Francis said in the opening lines. "And it is only in peace that we can enter profoundly into ourselves and recognize the authentic desires the Lord has placed in our hearts." For the believer, the Pope reminded the faithful, "the Word of God is not simply a text to read. The Word of God is a living presence, it is a work of the Holy Spirit that comforts, instructs, gives light, strength, refreshment, and a zest for life. It is a real foretaste of heaven. A great saint and pastor, Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, understood this well, when he wrote: 'When I read Sacred Scripture, God returns and walks in the earthly paradise'". Scripture helps us "read what is stirring in our hearts, learning to recognize God's voice and to distinguish it from other voices that seem to vie for our attention, but leave us confused in the end", Francis went on: "The Bible warns us that God's voice resounds in stillness, in attention, in silence", he added with regard to the "affective relationship" with Scripture, which "leads us to experience an affective relationship with the Lord Jesus." "We can often have a distorted idea about God, thinking of him as a sullen judge, a harsh judge, ready to catch us in the act", the Pope warned: "On the contrary, Jesus reveals a God who is full of compassion and tenderness for us, ready to sacrifice himself so he can come to us, just like the father in the parable of the prodigal son."

"The Word of God touches the heart and changes your life",

Francis assured: "And I have witnessed this many times. Because the Lord does not want to destroy us. God wants us to be stronger, better, every day", he remarked: "The Word of God always makes us look at another side – that is, the cross is here, this is awful, but there is something else, hope, resurrection. The Word of God opens every door because He is the door." "Let us pick up the Gospel, take the Bible in our hands – 5 minutes a day", Francis added off-text: "Carry a pocket-size Gospel with you, in your purse, and when you are traveling, read it a bit. Do this and you will see how your lives will change, with the proximity of the Word of God." **"It is very beautiful to think of our life with the Lord as a relationship with a friend which grows day by day"**, Francis said: "Friendship with God is the way: God loves us, He wants us to be his friends. Friendship with God is able to change the heart. Piety is one of the great gifts of the Holy Spirit, which gives us the ability to recognize God's fatherhood. We have a tender Father, an affectionate Father, a Father who loves us, who has always loved us. When we experience this, our hearts melt and doubts, fears, feelings of unworthiness are dissolved. Nothing can hinder this love that comes from being in contact with the Lord. And this love reminds us of another great help, the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is present in us and who instructs us, makes the Word of God that we read come alive, suggests new meanings, opens doors that seem closed, indicates paths in life where there seem to be only darkness and confusion." "I ask you – Do you pray to the Holy Spirit? But who is he? The Great Unknown One?", Francis asked those present. "We pray to the Father with the Our Father. We pray to Jesus. But we forget the Spirit!", Francis denounced. "One time when I was doing catechesis with children, I asked the question, 'Which one of you knows who the Holy Spirit is?' And one of them said, 'I know!' –

‘And who is he?’ – ‘The paralytic’, he answered me!”, Francis recalled. “How often the Holy Spirit is over there like a Person who doesn’t count”, he denounced. “The Holy Spirit is the one who gives life to the soul! Let him enter!”, the Pope’s exhortation: “Speak with the Holy Spirit – who is anything but paralyzed, right?. He is the Church’s strength. The Holy Spirit is discernment in act, the presence of God in us. He is the gift, the greatest gift the Father assures to those who ask. It is interesting to live our lives in friendship with the Holy Spirit. He changes you. He makes you grow. The goal of discernment is to recognize the salvation God is working in my life. It reminds me that I am never alone and that, if I am struggling, it is because the stakes of the game are high.”

“The Holy Spirit is always with us”,

the Pope assured: “With these aids the Lord gives to us, there is no need to be afraid. Keep going forward, courageously and joyfully!”

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