



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS **GENERAL AUDIENCE** *Saint Peter's Square*

Wednesday, 17 June 2015

[Multimedia]

The family - 19. Death

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

In the course of our catecheses on the family, today we take direct inspiration from the episode narrated by Luke the Evangelist, which we have just heard (cf. Lk 7:11-15). It is a very moving scene, which shows us Christ's compassion for those who suffer — in this case a widow who has lost her only child — and it also shows us Jesus' power over death.

Death is an experience which touches all families, without exception. It is part of life; yet, where familial love is concerned, death never seems natural. For parents, surviving their own children is particularly heartbreaking; it contradicts the fundamental nature of the very relationships that give meaning to the family. The loss of a son or daughter is like time stopping altogether: it opens a chasm that swallows both past and future. Death, which takes away a little child or young person, is a blow to the promises, to the gifts and the sacrifices of love joyfully brought to the life we gave birth to. Frequently parents come to Mass at Santa Marta with the photo of a son, a daughter, a baby, a boy, a girl, and they say to me: "He's gone, she's gone". And their faces are filled with grief. Death touches us and when it is a child's, it touches us profoundly. The whole family is left paralyzed, speechless. And the child left alone by the loss of one or both parents suffers in a similar way. She asks: "Where is my daddy? Where is my mama? — Well, she is in heaven" — "Why can't I see her?". This question covers the agony in the heart of a child left alone. The emptiness of abandonment that opens up in him is made all the more agonizing by the fact that he doesn't have the life-experience to even "give a name" to what has happened. "When is daddy coming back?" "When is mama coming?". What do you say when a child suffers? This is what death in the family is like.

In these cases, death is like a black whole that opens up in the life of the family and for which we

have no explanation. And at times we even go so far as to lay the blame on God. How many people — I understand them — get angry with God, blaspheme: “Why did you take my son, my daughter? There is no God, God does not exist! Why did he do this?”. We hear this so often. But this anger is basically what comes from the heart in great pain; the loss of a son or of a daughter, of a father or of a mother, is a great sorrow. This happens over and over in families. In these cases, I said, death is like a hole. But physical death has “accomplices” even worse than itself, which are called hate, envy, pride, greed; in short, the sin of the world which works for death and makes it even more painful and unjust. Family bonds seem to be the predestined and helpless victims of these helping powers of death, trailing the history of mankind. Let us think of the absurd “normality” with which, at certain moments and in certain places, events adding to the horror of death are provoked by the hatred and indifference of other human beings. May the Lord keep us free from being accustomed to this!

In the People of God, by the grace of his compassion granted in Jesus, many families prove by their deeds that death does not have the last word: this is a true act of faith. Every time a family in mourning — even terrible mourning — finds the strength to guard the faith and love that unite us to those we love, it has already prevented death from taking everything. The darkness of death should be confronted with a more intense work of love. “My God, lighten my darkness!”, is the invocation of evening prayer. In the light of the Resurrection of the Lord, who abandons none of those whom the Father entrusted to him, we can take the “sting” out of death, as the Apostle Paul says (1 Cor 15:55); we can prevent it from poisoning life, from rendering vain our love, from pushing us into the darkest chasm.

In this faith, we can console one another, knowing that the Lord has conquered death once and for all. Our loved ones are not lost in the darkness of nothing: hope assures us that they are in the good and strong hands of God. Love is stronger than death. Thus, the way is to let love grow, make it stronger, and love will guard us until the day that every tear shall be wiped away, when “death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more” (Rev 21:4). If we allow ourselves to be sustained by this faith, the experience of grief can generate even stronger family bonds, a new openness to the pain of other families, a new brotherhood with families that are born and reborn in hope. To be born and reborn in hope, this gives us faith. But I would like to stress the last phrase of the Gospel which he heard today (cf. Lk 7:11-15). After Jesus brought the young man, the only son of a widow, back to life, the Gospel says: “Jesus gave him back to his mother”. And this is our hope! All our loved ones who are gone, the Lord will give them back to us and we will be together with them. This hope does not disappoint! Let us remember well this action of Jesus: “And Jesus gave him back to his mother”, thus the Lord will do with all our loved ones in the family!

This faith protects us from the nihilist vision of death, as well as from the false consolations of the world, so that the Christian truth “does not risk mixing itself with myths of various types”, surrendering to superstitions beliefs ([*Benedict XVI, Angelus, 2 November 2008*](#)). Today it is

necessary that Pastors and all Christians express in a more concrete way the meaning of the faith in regards to the family experience of grief. We should not deny them the right to weep — we must weep in mourning — “Jesus wept” and was “deeply troubled” by the grave loss of a family that he loved (cf. Jn 11:33-37). We can draw from the simple and strong testimony of the many families who have been able to grasp, in the most arduous transition of death, the safe passage of the Lord, Crucified and Risen, with his irrevocable promise of the resurrection of the dead. God’s work of love is stronger than the work of death. It is of that love, it is precisely of that love, that we must make ourselves hard-working “accomplices”, with our faith! And let us remember Jesus’ deed: “And Jesus gave him back to his mother”, so he will do with all our loved ones and with us when we meet again, when death will be definitively conquered in us. It was conquered by Jesus’ Cross. Jesus will give us all back to the family!

Special greetings:

Tomorrow, as you know, the Encyclical on the care of “our common home” , which is creation, will be released. This “home” of ours is deteriorating and this harms everyone, especially the poorest. Mine is therefore a call to responsibility, based on the task God gave to human beings in creation: “to till and keep” the “garden” in which he placed him (cf. Gen 2:15). I invite all people to accept with an open heart this Document, which is in line with the Social Teaching of the Church.

This coming Saturday is the World Day for Refugees, sponsored by the United Nations. Let us pray for the many brothers and sisters who seek refuge far from their land, who seek a home where they will be able to live without fear, that they might be ever respected in their dignity. I encourage the work of those who bring them aid and I wish for the international community to act unanimously and effectively to prevent the causes of forced emigration. And I invite all of you to ask forgiveness for the people and institutions who close the door to these people who seek a family, who seek protection.

I greet the English speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today’s Audience, including those from England, Scotland, Zambia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Pakistan, Vietnam, Puerto Rico and the United States. I pray especially for families mourning loved ones. May the Church’s pastors and communities come to their aid in prayer, acts of concrete help, and with tenderness. Upon all of you and your loved ones, I invoke the Lord Jesus’ abundant blessings of peace and joy. May God bless you all!