The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS ***GENERAL AUDIENCE*** *Wednesday, 25 October 2017* [Multimedia]

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

This is the final catechesis on the theme of Christian hope, which has accompanied us since the beginning of this liturgical year. I shall conclude by speaking about *Paradise*, as the *aim of our hope*.

“Paradise” is one of the last words spoken by Jesus on the Cross, addressed to the good thief. Let us pause for a moment on this scene. On the Cross, Jesus is not alone. Beside him, on the right and on the left, there are two criminals. Perhaps, passing before those three crosses raised on Golgotha, one drew a sigh of relief, thinking that at last justice had been done by putting such people to death.

Next to Jesus is even a confessed criminal: one who recognizes that he deserved that dreadful torture. We call him the “good thief”, who, as opposed to the other, says: “we are receiving the due reward of our deeds” (Lk 23:41).

On Calvary, on that tragic and holy Friday, Jesus reaches the finality of his Incarnation, of his solidarity with we sinners. Fulfilled there is what the Prophet Isaiah had said of the suffering Servant: “he was numbered with the transgressors” (cf. 53:12; cf Lk 22:37).

It is there, on Calvary, that Jesus has his final appointment with a sinner, to throw open the gates of His Kingdom for him too. This is interesting: it is the only time that the word “Paradise” appears in the Gospels. Jesus promises it to a “poor devil” who, on the wood of the cross, had the courage to proffer Him the most humble of requests: “Remember me when you have entered your kingdom” (cf. Lk 23:42). He had no good works to assert; he had nothing; but he entrusted himself to Jesus, whom he recognized as innocent, good, so different from himself (v. 41). Those words of humble remorse were enough to touch Jesus’ heart.

The good thief reminds us of our true condition before God: that we are his children, that he feels

compassion for us, that he is defenseless each time we show our nostalgia for his love. In many hospital wards or prison cells this miracle is repeated countless times: there is no person, as bad a life as he may have lived, who, faced with despair, is without recourse to grace. We all appear before God empty-handed, somewhat like the tax collector in the parable who had stopped to pray at the back of the Temple (cf. Lk 18:13). Each time a person, performing the last examination of conscience of his life, discovers that his shortcomings far exceed his good deeds, he must not feel discouraged, but must entrust himself to God's mercy. And this gives us hope; it opens our heart!

God is Father, and he awaits our return to the very end. And when the prodigal son returns and begins to confess his sins, the father closes his mouth with an embrace. (cf. Lk 15:20). This is God: this is how he loves us!

Paradise is not a fairytale place, much less an enchanted garden. Paradise is the embrace of God, infinite Love, and we enter there thanks to Jesus, who died on the Cross for us. Where there is Jesus there is mercy and happiness; without him there is cold and darkness. At the hour of death, a Christian repeats to Jesus: "Remember me". And even if there may no longer be anyone who remembers us, Jesus is there, beside us. He wants to take us to the most beautiful place that exists. He wants to take us there with the small or great deal of good that we have done in our life, so that nothing of what he has already redeemed may be lost. And into the Father's house he will also bring everything in us that still needs redemption: the shortcomings and mistakes of an entire life. This is the aim of our existence: that all be fulfilled, and be transformed into love.

If we believe this, death ceases to frighten us, and we can also hope to depart from this world in a peaceful way, with so much confidence. Those who have met Jesus no longer fear anything. We too can repeat the words of the elderly Simeon; he too was blessed by the encounter with Christ, after a lifetime spent in anticipation of this event: "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation" (Lk 2:29-30). At that instant, at last, we will no longer need anything; we will no longer see in a confused way. We will no longer weep in vain, because all has passed; even the prophecies, even consciousness. But not love: this endures. Because "love never ends" (1 Cor 13:8).

Special greetings:

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, particularly the groups from England, Norway, India, Malaysia, China, Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, Canada and the United States of America. I extend a particular welcome to the priests from the Metropolis of Néa Ionía of the Orthodox Church of Greece, accompanied by His Grace Metropolitan Gabriel. Upon all of you, and your families, I invoke joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Lastly I offer a greeting to *young people*, to *the sick* and to *newlyweds*. At the end of the month of

October I would like to recommend that you pray the Holy Rosary. May this Marian prayer be for you, dear *young people*, an occasion to understand more deeply the Mystery of Christ at work in your lives; may you love the Rosary, dear *sick people*, so it may give comfort and meaning to your suffering; may it become for you, dear *newlyweds*, a privileged occasion to experience that spiritual intimacy with God that lays the foundations of a new family.

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