



# The Holy See

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POPE FRANCIS **GENERAL AUDIENCE** Paul VI Audience Hall

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*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good Morning!*

The final part of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles tells us that the Gospel *continues its journey not only on land but also by sea*, on a ship that brings the imprisoned Paul, from Caesarea to Rome (cf. Acts 27:1-28, 16), to the heart of the Empire so that the Word of the Risen One would be fulfilled: “you shall 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, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Gospel will reach all people and become universal. Take it. Read it.

From the outset, the voyage meets with unfavourable conditions. The journey becomes dangerous. Paul advises not to continue navigating but the centurion takes no notice and puts his trust in the captain and in the owner of the ship. The voyage continues and a wind so impetuous is unleashed that the crew lose control of the ship and the ship sails adrift.

When death seems imminent and despair grips everyone, Paul intervenes and reassures his companions by saying what we have just listened to: “this very night there stood by 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 lo, God has granted you all those who sail with you’” (Acts 27:23-24). Even in times of trial, Paul does not stop being the *guardian of the life of others and the catalyst for their hope*.

Thus Luke shows us that the design that leads Paul towards Rome not only saves the Apostle but also his fellow travellers and the shipwreck changes from being a disaster into a providential opportunity for the proclamation of the Gospel.

After the shipwreck comes the arrival at the island of Malta whose inhabitants offer a warm welcome. The Maltese are good, they are meek, they were already welcoming at that time. It is raining and cold and they light a fire to ensure the shipwrecked may have some warmth and relief.

Here too, as a true disciple of Christ, Paul offers his service, feeding the fire with some branches. During this task he is bitten by a viper but he suffers no harm: upon seeing this the people say: “But he must be a great delinquent because he could save himself from shipwreck and then ends up being bitten by a viper”. They were waiting for him to fall dead but he suffered no harm and is even mistaken for a divinity rather than for a criminal. In reality that relief comes from the Risen Christ who assists him according to the promise made to believers before ascending into heaven: “They will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them, they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover” (Mk 16:18). History states that there were no vipers in Malta from that time onwards. This is God’s blessing for this good people’s reception of the shipwrecked people.

Indeed Paul’s stay in Malta becomes a favourable opportunity to give “flesh” to the Word he proclaims and to thus exercise a ministry of compassion in healing the sick. And this is a law of the Gospel: when a believer experiences salvation they should not keep it for themselves but spread it around. “Goodness always tends to spread. Every authentic experience of truth and goodness seeks 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*, n. 9). Christians who are “suffering” can certainly move themselves closer to those who suffer because they know what suffering is, and they can open their hearts and exercise solidarity to others.

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

Today let us ask the Lord to help us experience every trial sustained by the energy of faith and to be attentive to history’s many shipwrecked who reach our shores exhausted, so that we too may know how to welcome them with that fraternal love that comes from the encounter with Jesus. This is what saves from the frost of indifference and inhumanity.

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### ***Special Greetings***

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!

There is a group from Australia among you. I would like to ask everyone to pray to the Lord that he

may help the people at this difficult time, with those massive fires. I am close to the people of Australia.

Lastly, I greet *young people, the elderly, the sick and newlyweds*. On Sunday, we will celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. Rediscover the grace that comes from the Sacrament and seek to convert it into daily life commitments. And I would like each of you to know the date of your baptism. We certainly know our date of birth. But how many of you know the date of your baptism? Not many of you ... it is forgotten because it is not celebrated. I will give you some homework: ask your parents, your grandparents, your uncles and aunts, your friends: When was I baptized? And always carry that baptism date with you in your heart to thank the Lord for the grace of baptism.