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General Audience: Divine Mercy and Correction

Vatican City, 2 March 2016 – Pope Francis taught on the relationship between divine mercy and correction in light of the Scripture reading during this morning's catechesis at the general audience held in St. Peter's Square. Around 20,000 pilgrims and faithful were in attendance. "Speaking of divine mercy," Pope Francis began, "we have repeatedly evoked the figure of the father who loves his children, who helps them, worries for them, forgives them and, as their father, educates and corrects them when they make a mistake in order to help them grow well."

In the Bible, the prophet Isaiah presents the divine figure this way, as a loving but stern and attentive father who addresses the people of Israel accusing them of infidelity and corruption so that they might return to the path of righteousness. "Through the prophet, God speaks to people," the Pope explained, "with the bitterness of a disappointed father who has raised his children and now they are rebelling against Him. Even animals, as is written in the prophet's text, are loyal to their master and recognize the hand that feeds them. The people, however, no longer recognize God and refuse to understand. "Although wounded," the Holy Father noted, "God lets love speak. He calls to these corrupt children's' conscience so that they might repent and let themselves love again."

"The relationship between parents and children, which the prophets often refer to in order to speak of the relationship of covenant between God and his people, has become unnatural here. Parents' educational goals aim at helping [their children] grow in freedom, at making them responsible, capable of performing good deeds for themselves and for others. Instead, because of sin, freedom becomes the pretence of autonomy, a claim of pride, and pride leads to opposition and the illusion of self-sufficiency," the pontiff added.

This is when God calls to his people: 'You're on the wrong path.' Affectionately and bitterly He says "'my' people'. God never rejects us. We are his people. The most evil of men, the most evil of women, the most evil of persons are his children. This is God: He never, never rejects us! He always says, 'Child, come.' And this is our Father's love. This is God's mercy. Having such a father gives us hope, gives us confidence. This belonging should be lived in trust and obedience, with the awareness that everything is a gift that comes from the Father's love. But instead, here is vanity, folly, and idolatry."

Isaiah, as the Pope recalled, spoke directly to this people using harsh words to help them understand the seriousness of their guilt, calling them a sinful people, corrupt children who had forsaken the Lord and turned their backs upon him. "The consequence of sin is a state of suffering, which even the country suffers from, devastated and turned into a wasteland to the point that Zion---which is Jerusalem---becomes uninhabitable. Where God and his paternity are rejected, there life is no longer possible. Existence loses its roots and everything appears perverted and destroyed. However, even this painful moment has sight of salvation. The test is given so that the people can experience the bitterness of those who abandon God and must then face the bleak emptiness of the choice of death. Suffering, the inevitable consequence of a self-destructive decision, has to make the sinner reflect in order to open them to conversion and forgiveness."

"This is the path of divine mercy," Pope Francis exclaimed. "God doesn't treat us according to our sins. Punishment becomes an instrument for provoking reflection. This makes it clear that God forgives his people. He gives grace and doesn't destroy everything but always leaves the door open to hope. Salvation involves the decision to listen and let oneself be converted but it always remains a free gift."

"The Lord, therefore, in his mercy, indicates a road that is not the one of ritual sacrifices but rather of justice. The rite of worship is not criticized as unnecessary in itself but because, instead of expressing conversion, claims to replace it and thus it becomes the search of its own justice, creating the deceptive belief that the sacrifices save and not divine mercy that forgives sin. Let us understand this well: when someone is sick, they go to the doctor. When someone feels they have sinned, they go to the Lord. But if, instead of going to the doctor, they go to a sorcerer, they won't heal. So many times we don't go to the Lord but prefer to take wrong paths, seeking justification, justice, and peace outside of Him. God, the prophet Isaiah says, does not like the blood of bulls and lambs, especially if the offer is made with hands that are dirty with the blood of one's brothers."

"I think," the Pope continued, "that some of the Church's benefactors come with an offer, 'Take this for the Church', that is the result of the blood of so many people who have been exploited, abused, or enslaved with poorly paid jobs. I say to these people, 'Please, take your check back. Burn it.' The people of God, the Church does not need dirty money. She needs hearts open to God's mercy. You must approach God with purified hands, avoiding evil and practising good and justice."

This is why the prophet exhorts the people to stop doing evil, to learn to do good, to seek justice, to redress wrongs, to hear the orphan's plea, and to defend the widow. "Think of all the refugees who land in Europe without knowing where to go," Pope Francis added.

And then, as Isaiah says, though your sins be like scarlet, the Lord will make them white as snow. "Though they be red like crimson, they may become white as wool and the people will eat the good things of the land and live in peace. This is the miracle of the forgiveness that God, as Father, wants to give to his people. The mercy of God is offered to all and these words of the prophet apply even today for all of us, called to live as children of God."
