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General audience: there is no saint without a past, nor sinner without a future

Vatican City, 13 April 2016 – Being Christians does not make us impeccable, and pride and arrogance are a wall that prevent us from seeing the merciful face of God, said Pope Francis this morning during the Wednesday general audience in St. Peter's Square, attended by more than twenty thousand people.

The prologue of today's catechesis was the Gospel account of the call to Matthew who, as a publican, a tax collector on behalf of the Roman empire, was considered by the Pharisees as a public sinner. However, Jesus invited him to follow Him, and was willing to share the table with him. He did not exclude Matthew or others who were considered sinners, thus demonstrating that they could be converted into His followers. "Being Christian does not make us impeccable", affirmed Francis. "Like the publican Matthew, each one of us is entrusted to the grace of God despite our sins. By calling Matthew, Jesus shows sinners that He does not look to their past, their social condition, or external conventions, but instead opens up to them a new future".

"There is no saint without a past, nor sinner without a future", commented the Pope. "It is sufficient to answer the invitation with a humble and sincere heart. The Church is not a community of the perfect, but rather of journeying disciples who follow the Lord because they recognise themselves as sinners and in need of His forgiveness. Christian life is therefore a school of humility that opens us up to grace".

However, those who believe themselves to be more righteous or better than others do not understand this behaviour. "Arrogance and pride prevent them from recognising themselves as being in need of salvation; on the contrary, these traits prevent them from seeing the merciful face of God and from acting with mercy. They are like a wall that obstructs the relationship with God", Francis observed. "Jesus' mission is exactly this: to come in search of each one of us, to heal our wounds and to call us to follow Him with love. He says this clearly: 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick'. Jesus presents Himself as a good doctor. He announces the kingdom of God, and the signs of His coming are clear: He heals the sick, and He frees from fear, from death and from the devil. Before Jesus, there is no sinner who can be excluded, because there is no infirmity that God's healing power cannot cure. And this must inspire trust in us. Calling sinners to His table, He cures them and re-establishes within them that vocation that they believed to be lost, and which the Pharisees have forgotten: being invited to God's banquet".

If the Pharisees considered the invitees solely as sinners and refused to be seated alongside them, Jesus on the contrary reminds them that they too are God's guests. "Sitting at the table with Jesus means being transformed and saved by Him. In the Christian community, the table of Jesus is twofold: the Word and the Eucharist. With the first, the Word, He reveals himself and invites us to a dialogue between friends. Jesus was not afraid of dialogue with sinners, nor with publicans, nor with prostitutes. His Word – frees us from the evil that is concealed in our lives ... He gives us strength and hope. The Eucharist, in turn, nourishes us with the very life itself of Jesus . Partaking in the Eucharist we nourish ourselves with the Body and Blood of Jesus, and yet coming to us, it is Jesus Who unites us to His Body".

Jesus concluded the dialogue with the Pharisees by reminding them of the words of the prophet Hosea - "I desire steadfast love, not sacrifice" – with which he reproved the people of Israel, as their prayers were empty and incoherent. "Despite the covenant of God and mercy, the people often lived a form of superficial religiosity without living the Lord's command in depth. For this reason the prophet insisted on mercy, that is, the loyalty of a heart that recognises its own sins, that repents and is again faithful to the covenant with God. 'And not sacrifice': without a repentant heart, any religious act is ineffectual! Jesus also applies this prophetic phrase to human relations: those Pharisees were very religious in appearance, but they were not willing to share their table with publicans and sinners; they did not recognise the possibility of repentance and therefore of healing; they did not put mercy first, and although they were faithful guardians of the Law, they showed that they did not know God's heart".

The Pope concluded by reiterating that we are all invited to the Lord's table: "Let us make ours the invitation to be seated beside Him, along with His disciples. Let us learn to look with mercy and to recognise in each one of them a companion. We are all disciples who need to experience and live the comforting word of Jesus. We all need to be nourished by God's mercy, as it is from this source that our salvation springs".
