



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE **BOLLETTINO**

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General audience: to ignore the poor is to scorn God

Vatican City, 18 May 2016 – Mercy as a responsibility to the poor – explained through the parable of the poor Lazarus, who lay at the door of the wealthy man clothed in purple and fine linen, who ate sumptuously every day without leaving even the crumbs for the beggar outside – was the theme of the Holy Father's catechesis during today's general audience in St. Peter's Square.

"The lives of these two people run parallel to one another; they never meet", said the Pope. "The rich man's door is always closed to the poor man, who lies there outside, hoping to eat the leftovers from the rich man's table. The rich man wears fine robes, whereas Lazarus is covered in sores ... and starves to death. ... This scene recalls the Son's harsh reproach to man in the last judgement: 'For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Lazarus thus represents the silent cry of the poor of all times and the contradiction of a world where immense riches and resources remain in the hands of the few."

Jesus recounts that one day the rich man died and turned to Abraham, addressing him as "Father". He thus claims to be his son, and therefore to belong to the people of God, yet in life he showed no consideration to God, instead making himself the centre of all, closed up in his world of luxury and waste. By excluding Lazarus he had taken into account neither the Lord nor His law. "To ignore the poor is to scorn God!" affirmed Francis. "We must learn this very well: to ignore the poor is to scorn God", he repeated, explaining that in the parable there is a noteworthy detail: the rich man has no name, whereas that of the poor man, Lazarus, which means "God helps", is repeated five times. "Lazarus, who lies before the door, is a living reminder to the rich man to think of God, but the rich man does not take heed. He will be condemned not for his riches, but for his incapacity to feel compassion for Lazarus or to help him."

In the second part of the parable, we encounter Lazarus and the rich man after death. The situation has been reversed: the angels take Lazarus to heaven, to Abraham, whereas the rich man is left to his torments. The rich man raises his eyes and sees the faraway Abraham, and Lazarus next to him, but his words betray him. 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame'."

"Now the rich man recognises Lazarus and asks him for help, whereas in life he pretended not to see him. How often so many people act as if they did not see the poor! For them the poor do not exist", observed Francis. "Before he denied him even the leftovers from his table, but now he wants Lazarus to bring him something to drink. He believes he can still lay claim to rights deriving from his previous social condition. Declaring it impossible to grant his request, Abraham in person offers the key to the parable: he explains that good and bad are distributed so as to compensate earthly injustice, and the door that separated the rich man from the poor during life has transformed into 'a great chasm'. While Lazarus was at the door, the rich man still had a chance of salvation, but now that both of them are dead, the situation has become irreversible. God is not directly called into the issue because the parable clearly warns that God's mercy towards us is tied to our mercy towards our neighbour. When the latter is lacking, the former does not find space in our closed heart, and cannot enter. If I do not open my heart to the poor, this door remains closed to God too, and this is terrible."

The rich man then thinks of his brothers, who risk the same fate, and asks if Lazarus can return to the world to warn them. But Abraham answers, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them." "We must not wait for prodigious events to convert, but instead open our heart to the Word of God, that calls us to love God and neighbour. The Word of God can revive an arid heart and heal its blindness. The rich man knew the Word of God, but he did not let it enter into his heart, he did not listen to it, and therefore was unable to open his eyes and have compassion for the poor."

"No messenger and no message can substitute the poor whom we meet on our journey, because in them we encounter Jesus Himself: 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me'. Thus, in the reversal of fate that the parable describes, there is hidden the mystery of our salvation, in which Christ unites poverty with mercy", concluded the Holy Father. "Listening to this Gospel, together, along with the poor of the earth, we can sing with Mary, 'He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty.'"
