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“May religions be doors of hope”, says the Pope in audience with members of different religions

This morning in the Clementine Hall the Holy Father received two hundred members of other religions (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and others), engaged in the sphere of works of charity and mercy. The audience took place in the context of the Jubilee Year that is coming to its end, during which, as the Pope explained, the Catholic Church has pondered the heart of the Christian message from the viewpoint of mercy, which is “the very foundation of the Church’s life” and “the key to understanding the mystery of man, of that humanity which, today too, is in great need of forgiveness and peace”.

“Yet the mystery of mercy is not to be celebrated in words alone, but above all by deeds, by a truly merciful way of life marked by disinterested love, fraternal service and sincere sharing”, he continued. “The Church increasingly desires to adopt this way of life, also as part of her ‘duty to foster unity and charity’ among all men and women. The religions are likewise called to this way of life, in order to be, particularly in our own day, messengers of peace and builders of communion, and to proclaim, in opposition to all those who sow conflict, division and intolerance, that ours is a time of fraternity”.

“The theme of mercy is familiar to many religious and cultural traditions, where compassion and nonviolence are essential elements pointing to the way of life”, he said, citing an ancient proverb of the Tao-Te-Ching: “death is hard and stiff; life is soft and supple”. “To bow down with compassionate love before the weak and needy is part of the authentic spirit of religion, which rejects the temptation to resort to force, refuses to barter human lives and sees others as brothers and sisters, and never mere statistics. To draw near to all those living in situations that call for our concern, such as sickness, disability, poverty, injustice and the aftermath of conflicts and migrations: this is a summons rising from the heart of every genuine religious tradition. It is the echo of the divine voice heard in the conscience of every person, calling him or her to reject selfishness and to be open. Open to the Other above us, who knocks on the door of our heart, and open to the other at our side, who knocks at the door of our home, asking for attention and assistance”.

“The very word ‘mercy’ is a summons to an open and compassionate heart”, the Pope added, recalling that originates from the Latin word *misericordia*, “which evokes a heart – *cor* – sensitive to suffering, but especially to those who suffer, a heart that overcomes indifference because it shares in the sufferings of others. In the Semitic languages, like Arabic and Hebrew, the root *r (a) h (a) m*, which also expresses God’s mercy, has to do with a mother’s womb, the deepest source of human love, the feelings of a mother for the child to whom she will give

birth. In this regard, the prophet Isaiah conveys a magnificent message, which, on God's part, is both a promise of love and a challenge: 'Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even through she may forget, yet I will never forget you'. All too often, sad to say, we forget, our hearts grow heedless and indifferent. We distance ourselves from God, our neighbour and even our historical memory, and we end up repeating, in even more cruel forms, tragic errors of the past".

"This is the drama of evil, of the grim depths to which our freedom can plunge when tempted by evil, ever-present, waiting to strike and bring us down. Yet precisely here, before the great riddle of evil that tests every religious experience, we find the most amazing aspect of merciful love", he emphasised." That love does not leave us prey to evil or to our own frailty; it does not 'forget', but 'remembers', and draws near to every human misery in order to relieve it. Like a mother. Whatever the evil done by her child, a mother always sees past the sin to recognise the face she bore in her womb".

"In today's ever more hectic and forgetful world, which leaves so many men and women behind as it races on, breathlessly and aimlessly, we need the oxygen of this gratuitous and life-giving love. We thirst for mercy and no technology can quench that thirst. We seek a love that endures beyond momentary pleasures, a safe harbour where we can end our restless wanderings, an infinite embrace that forgives and reconciles".

"How important this is, when we consider today's widespread fear that it is impossible to be forgiven, rehabilitated and redeemed from our weaknesses. For us Catholics, among the most meaningful rites of the Holy Year is that of walking with humility and trust through the door – the Holy Door – to find ourselves fully reconciled by the mercy of God, Who forgives our trespasses. But this demands that we too forgive those who trespass against us, the brothers and sisters who have offended us. We receive God's forgiveness in order to share it with others. Forgiveness is surely the greatest gift we can give to others, because it is the most costly. Yet at the same time, it is what makes us most like God".

Mercy, Francis reiterated, extends also to "the world around us, to our common home, which we are called to protect and preserve from unbridled and rapacious consumption. Our commitment is needed for an education to sobriety and to respect, to a more simple and orderly way of life, in which the resources of creation are used with wisdom and moderation, with concern for humanity as a whole and coming generations, not simply the interests of our particular group and the benefits of the present moment. Today in particular, 'the gravity of the ecological crisis demands that we all look to the common good, embarking on a path of dialogue which requires patience, self-discipline and generosity'".

"May this be the path we take. May we reject the aimless paths of disagreement and closed-mindedness", he exclaimed. "May it never happen again that the religions, because of the conduct of some of their followers, convey a distorted message, out of tune with that of mercy. Sadly, not a day passes that we do not hear of acts of violence, conflict, kidnapping, terrorist attacks, killings and destruction. It is horrible that at times, to justify such barbarism, the name of a religion or the name of God himself is invoked. May there be clear condemnation of these iniquitous attitudes that profane the name of God and sully the religious quest of mankind. May there instead be fostered everywhere the peaceful encounter of believers and genuine religious freedom. Here, our responsibility before God, humanity and the future is great; it calls for unrelenting effort, without dissimulation. It is a call that challenges us, a path to be taken together, for the good of all, and with hope. May the religions be wombs of life, bearing the merciful love of God to a wounded and needy humanity; may they be doors of hope helping to penetrate the walls erected by pride and fear".
