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Mass at the Jubilee of Prisoners: Let us never yield to the temptation of thinking that we cannot be forgiven

More than four thousand people, from twelve countries, including one thousand prisoners, participated this morning in the Holy Mass celebrated by the Pope in St. Peter's Basilica on the occasion of the Jubilee of Prisoners. In his homily, the full text of which follows, the Holy Father highlights in several passages the strength of hope, mercy and forgiveness.

"The message that God's word wants to bring us today is surely that of hope, the hope that does not disappoint.

One of the seven brothers condemned to death by King Antiochus Epiphanes speaks of 'the hope God gives of being raised again by him'. These words demonstrate the faith of those martyrs who, despite suffering and torture, were steadfast in looking to the future. Theirs was a faith that, in acknowledging God as the source of their hope, reflected the desire to attain a new life.

In the Gospel, we have heard how Jesus, with a simple yet complete answer, demolishes the banal casuistry that the Sadducees had set before him. His response – 'He is not God of the dead, but of the living; for all live to Him' – reveals the true face of God, who desires only life for all His children. The hope of being born to a new life, then, is what we must make our own, if we are to be faithful to the teaching of Jesus.

Hope is a gift of God. We must ask for it. It is placed deep within each human heart in order to shed light on this life, so often troubled and clouded by so many situations that bring sadness and pain. We need to nourish the roots of our hope so that they can bear fruit; primarily, the certainty of God's closeness and compassion, despite whatever evil we have done. There is no corner of our heart that cannot be touched by God's love. Whenever someone makes a mistake, the Father's mercy is all the more present, awakening repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace.

Today we celebrate the Jubilee of Mercy for you and with you, our brothers and sisters who are imprisoned. Mercy, as the expression of God's love, is something we need to think about more deeply. Certainly, breaking the law involves paying the price, and losing one's freedom is the worst part of serving time, because it affects us so deeply. All the same, hope must not falter. Paying for the wrong we have done is one thing, but another

thing entirely is the 'breath' of hope, which cannot be stifled by anyone or anything. Our heart always yearns for goodness. We are in debt to the mercy that God constantly shows us, for he never abandons us.

In his Letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul speaks of God as 'the God of hope'. It is as if Paul wants to say also to us: 'God hopes'. While this may seem paradoxical, it is true: God hopes! His mercy gives Him no rest. He is like that father in the parable, who keeps hoping for the return of his son who has fallen by the wayside. God does not rest until He finds the sheep that was lost. So if God hopes, then no one should lose hope. For hope is the strength to keep moving forward. It is the power to press on towards the future and a changed life. It is the incentive to look to tomorrow, so that the love we have known, for all our failings, can show us a new path. In a word, hope is the proof, lying deep in our hearts, of the power of God's mercy. That mercy invites us to keep looking ahead and to overcome our attachment to evil and sin through faith and abandonment in Him.

Dear friends, today is your Jubilee! Today, in God's sight, may your hope be kindled anew. A Jubilee, by its very nature, always brings with it a proclamation of freedom. It does not depend on me to grant this, but the Church's duty, one she cannot renounce, is to awaken within you the desire for true freedom. Sometimes, a certain hypocrisy leads to people considering you only as wrongdoers, for whom prison is the sole answer. I want to tell you, every time I visit a prison I ask myself: 'Why them and not me?'. We can all make mistakes: all of us. And in one way or another we have made mistakes. Hypocrisy leads us to overlook the possibility that people can change their lives; we put little trust in rehabilitation, rehabilitation into society. But in this way we forget that we are all sinners and often, without being aware of it, we too are prisoners. At times we are locked up within our own prejudices or enslaved to the idols of a false sense of wellbeing. At times we get stuck in our own ideologies or consider absolute the laws of the market even as they crush other people. At such times, we imprison ourselves behind the walls of individualism and self-sufficiency, deprived of the truth that sets us free. Pointing the finger against someone who has made mistakes cannot become an alibi for concealing our own contradictions.

We know that in God's eyes no one can consider himself just. But no one can live without the certainty of finding forgiveness! The repentant thief, crucified at Jesus' side, accompanied Him into paradise. So may none of you allow yourselves to be held captive by the past! True enough, even if we wanted to, we can never rewrite the past. But the history that starts today, and looks to the future, has yet to be written, by the grace of God and your personal responsibility. By learning from past mistakes, you can open a new chapter of your lives. Let us never yield to the temptation of thinking that we cannot be forgiven. Whatever our hearts may accuse us of, small or great, 'God is greater than our hearts'. We need but entrust ourselves to His mercy.

Faith, even when it is as tiny as a grain of mustard seed, can move mountains. How many times has the power of faith enabled us to utter the word pardon in humanly impossible situations. People who have suffered violence and abuse, either themselves, or in the person of their loved ones, or their property... there are some wounds that only God's power, His mercy, can heal. But when violence is met with forgiveness, even the hearts of those who have done wrong can be conquered by the love that triumphs over every form of evil. In this way, among the victims and among those who wronged them, God raises up true witnesses and workers of mercy.

Today we venerate the Blessed Virgin Mary in this statue, which represents her as a Mother who holds Jesus in her arms, together with a broken chain; it is the chain of slavery and imprisonment. May Our Lady look upon each of you with a Mother's love. May she intercede for you, so that your hearts can experience the power of hope for a new life, one worthy of being lived in complete freedom and in service to your neighbour".
