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BIURO PRASOWE STOLICY APOSTOLSKIEJ دار الصحافة التابعة للكرسي الرسولي

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General Audience

This morning's General Audience took place in Saint Peter's Square, where the Holy Father Francis met with groups of pilgrims and faithful from Italy and all over the world.

In his address in Italian the Pope continued his catechesis on the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, this time focusing on the passage: "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (*Acts of the Apostles* 17: 23).

After summarising his catechesis in several languages, the Holy Father addressed special greetings to the groups of faithful present. The General Audience concluded with the recitation of the *Pater Noster* and the Apostolic Blessing.

Catechesis of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Let us continue our "journey" with the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. After the trials he experienced in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea, Paul arrives in Athens, right in the heart of Greece (cf. *Acts* 17: 15). This city, which lived in the shadow of ancient glories despite political decadence, still held the primacy of culture. Here the Apostle's "spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols" (*Acts* 17: 16). This "impact" with paganism, however, instead of making him flee, drives him to create a bridge to dialogue with that culture.

Paul chooses to become familiar with the city and thus begins to frequent the most significant places and people. He goes to the synagogue, symbol of the life of faith; he goes to the square, symbol of city life; and he goes to the Areopagus, symbol of political and cultural life. He meets Jews, Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, and many others. He meets all the people, he does not close himself up; he goes to speak with all people. In this way Paul observes the culture, he observes the environment of Athens "with a contemplative gaze" which discovers "God dwelling in their homes, in their streets and squares" (*Evangelii gaudium*, 71). Paul does not look

at the city of Athens and the pagan world with hostility but with the eyes of faith. And this makes us question our way of looking at our cities: do we observe them with indifference? With contempt? Or with the faith that recognizes the children of God in the midst of the anonymous crowds?

Paul chooses the gaze that drives him to open up a passage between the Gospel and the pagan world. In the heart of one of the most celebrated institutions of the ancient world, the Areopagus, he offers an extraordinary example of inculturation of the message of faith: he proclaims Jesus Christ to the worshippers of idols, and does not do so by attacking them, but by making himself a “pontiff, a builder of bridges” (*Homily at Santa Marta*, 8 May 2013).

Paul takes his cue from the altar of the city dedicated to “the unknown god” (*Acts* 17: 23) – there was an altar with the inscription, “to the unknown god”, no image, nothing, just that inscription. Starting out from that “devotion” to the unknown god, to enter into empathy with his listeners, he proclaims that God dwells among the citizens (cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, 71) and “does not hide Himself from those who seek Him with a sincere heart, even though they do so tentatively” (*ibid*). It is precisely this presence that Paul seeks to reveal: “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (*Acts* 17: 23).

To reveal the identity of the god the Athenians worship, the Apostle starts from creation, that is the biblical faith in the God of the revelation, arriving at redemption and judgement, that is the proper Christian message. He shows the disproportion between the greatness of the Creator and the temples built by man, and explains that the Creator always makes himself sought so that each person may find Him. In this way Paul, according to a beautiful expression by Pope Benedict XVI, “is proclaiming Him Whom men do not know and yet do know – the Unknown-Known” (Benedict XVI, Meeting with representatives from the world of culture, Collège des Bernardins, 12 September 2008). Then, he invites everyone to go beyond “the times of ignorance” and to decide for conversion in view of the imminent judgement. Paul thus arrives at the kerygma and alludes to Christ, without naming Him, defining Him as “a man whom He has appointed; and of this He has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead” (*Acts* 17: 31).

And here, there’s the problem. The word of Paul, who until now had held his interlocutors in suspense – because it was an interesting discovery – finds a stumbling block: the death and resurrection of Christ appears to be “foolishness” (1 *Cor* 1: 23) and arouses mockery and derision. Paul then moves away: his attempt seems to have failed, yet some adhere to his word and open themselves to faith. Among them is a man, Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, and a woman, Damaris. Even in Athens the Gospel takes root and flows with two voices: that of the man and that of the woman!

Today let us too ask the Holy Spirit to teach us to build bridges with culture, with those who do not believe or with those who have a different creed from ours. Always build bridges, always reach out, no aggression. Let us ask Him for the capacity to delicately inculturate the message of faith, turning a contemplative gaze to those who are ignorant of Christ, moved by a love that warms even the most hardened hearts.

Greetings in English

I welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today’s audience, especially those from England, Scotland, Malta, Zimbabwe, India, Indonesia, Israel, Malaysia, the Philippines and the United States of America. Upon all of you I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. God bless you!

Greetings in various languages

The Pope greeted Polish pilgrims, recalling that next Sunday the Church in Poland will celebrate the 11th Day of

Solidarity with the Persecuted Church, organized by the “Aid to the Church in Need” Papal Foundation in collaboration with the Polish Episcopal Conference. “This year’s spiritual and material help will be directed in particular to Christians in Southern Sudan”, he noted. “May your prayer and concrete works of solidarity bring relief and aid to the brothers and sisters who suffer for Christ in different parts of the world”.

Finally, he dedicated a special thought to the young, the elderly, the sick and newlyweds. “The month of November, dedicated to remembrance of and prayer for the dead, is an opportunity for us all to reconsider the meaning of human existence and eternal life”, he said. “May this time be a stimulus to understand that life is of great value when it is lived as a gift, not only for oneself, but for God and for one’s neighbour”.
