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Audience of the Holy Father with the Roman Curia for the exchange of Christmas wishes

This morning, in the Hall of Blessing of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the cardinals and superiors of the Roman Curia for the exchange of Christmas wishes.

During the meeting, the Pope delivered the following address to the Roman Curia:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters!

1. Once more, the Lord grants us the grace of celebrating the mystery of his birth. Each year, kneeling before the Child lying in the manger (cf. *Lk* 2:12), we can look at our lives in this special light. It is not the light of the glory of this world, but “the true light, which enlightens everyone” (*Jn* 1:9). The humility of the Son of God who partook of our human condition is, for us, a lesson in seeing things as they really are. Just as he chose poverty, which is not merely the absence of wealth, but utter simplicity, so too, each of us is called to return to what is essential in our own lives, to discard all that is superfluous and a potential hindrance on the path of holiness. And that path of holiness is non-negotiable.

2. At the same time, we need to realize clearly that in reviewing our lives and our past, we should always begin with the remembrance of all the good we have known. For only when we are conscious of the Lord’s goodness to us can we also give a name to the evil that we have experienced or endured. The realization of our poverty, without the realization of God’s love, would crush us. Consequently, the interior attitude that we should deem most important is *gratitude*.

The Gospel, to explain this gratitude, recounts the story of the ten lepers who were all healed by Jesus; yet only one of them, a Samaritan, returned to thank him (cf. *Lk* 17:11-19). His act of thanksgiving obtained for him, in addition to his physical healing, complete salvation (cf. v. 19). His encounter with the goodness bestowed on him by God was not superficial; it touched his very heart. That is how it is: without a constant exercise of gratitude,

we would end up simply cataloguing our failures and lose sight of what counts most: the graces that the Lord grants us each day.

3. Much has happened in the course of this year and, before anything else, we want to thank the Lord for all his blessings. Yet we hope that among those blessings is that of our conversion. Conversion is a never-ending story. The worst thing that could happen to us is to think that we are no longer in need of conversion, either as individuals or as a community.

To be converted is to learn ever anew how to take the Gospel message seriously and to put it into practice in our lives. It is not simply about avoiding evil but doing all the good that we can. That is what it means to be converted. Where the Gospel is concerned, we are always like children needing to learn. The illusion that we have learned everything makes us fall into spiritual pride.

This year marked the sixtieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. What was the Council if not a great moment of conversion for the entire Church? As Saint John XXIII observed: "The Gospel does not change; it is we who begin to understand it more fully". The conversion that the Council sparked was an effort to understand the Gospel more fully and to make it relevant, living and effective in our time.

As had happened many other times in the Church's history, so too in our own time, we felt called, as a community of believers, to conversion. This process is far from complete. Our current reflection on the Church's synodality is the fruit of our conviction that the process of understanding Christ's message never ends, but constantly challenges us.

The contrary of conversion is "immobility", the secret belief that we have nothing else to learn from the Gospel. This is the error of trying to crystallize the message of Jesus in a single, perennially valid form. Instead, its form must be capable of constantly changing, so that its substance can remain constantly the same. True heresy consists not only in preaching another gospel (cf. *Gal* 1:9), as Saint Paul told us, but also in ceasing to translate its message into today's languages and ways of thinking, which is precisely what the Apostle of the Gentiles did. *To preserve* means to keep alive and not to imprison the message of Christ.

4. The true problem, however, and it is one that we often overlook, is that conversion does not only make us aware of evil so that we can choose the good; it also forces evil to change its tactics, to become more insidious, to find new disguises that will be hard for us to see through. The battle is real. The tempter keeps coming back, disguised, but he comes back.

In the Gospel, Jesus uses a parable to illustrate how this battle takes place at different times and in different ways: "When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe. But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away the armour in which he trusted and divides his plunder" (*Lk* 11:21-22). The first major problem is when we put too much trust in ourselves, our strategies and our programmes. This is the "pelagianism" of which I have often spoken. Some of our failures are in fact a grace, for they remind us that we should not put our trust in ourselves, but in the Lord alone. Some of our failings, also as a Church, are a forceful summons to put Christ back at the centre, for, as he says, "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters" (*Lk* 11:23). It is that easy.

Dear brothers and sisters, it is not enough to condemn evil, including the evil that quietly lurks among us. We need to respond by choosing to be converted. Mere condemnation can give the illusion that we have solved the problem, whereas what really counts is making the changes that will ensure that we no longer allow ourselves to be imprisoned by evil ways of thinking, which are often those of this world. One of the most helpful virtues to practice in this regard is the virtue of *vigilance*. Jesus uses a striking example to illustrate the need for vigilance, attentiveness to ourselves and to the Church. He tells us: "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but not finding any, it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came'. When it comes, it finds it swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first" (*Lk* 11:24-26). Our initial conversion follows a certain pattern: the evil that we acknowledge and try to uproot

from our lives does indeed leave us, but we would be naïve to think that it will long be gone. In short order, it comes back under a new guise. Before, it appeared rough and violent, now it shows up as elegant and refined. We need to realize that and once again to unmask it. Let me put it this way: they are “elegant demons”: they enter smoothly, without our even being conscious of them. Only *the daily practice of the examination of conscience* can enable us to be aware of them. Hence the importance of the examination of conscience, to keep watch over our house.

In the seventeenth century, for example, there was the well-known case of the nuns of Port Royal. One of their abbesses, Mère Angélique, had begun well; she had “charismatically” reformed herself and her monastery, even banishing parents from the cloister. She was a very gifted woman, born to govern, but then she became the soul of the Jansenist resistance, intransigent and unbending even in the face of ecclesiastical authority. Of her and her nuns, it was said that they were “pure as angels and proud as demons”. They had cast out the demon, but he had returned seven times stronger, and under the guise of austerity and rigour he had introduced rigidity and the presumption that they were better than others. The demon, once cast out, always returns; albeit under another guise, but he does return. Let us be attentive!

5. In the Gospel, Jesus tells many parables aimed at the righteous, the scribes and the Pharisees, in order to unmask their illusion of feeling themselves just and despising others (cf. *Lk* 18:9). For example, in the so-called parables of mercy (cf. *Lk* 15), he tells the stories of the lost sheep and of the younger son of that poor father, who considers himself treated as dead precisely by the latter. These parables remind us that the first way to sin is to go off, to go astray, and to do what is clearly wrong. Yet these parables also include those of the lost drachma and the elder son. These parables hit the mark: we can be lost even at home, like the coin of that woman, and we can be unhappy even while formally remaining faithful to our duties, like the elder son of the merciful father. For those who set out and go astray, it is easy to recognize how far they have wandered; for those who remain at home, it is not easy to appreciate the hell they are living in, convinced that they are mere victims, treated unjustly by constituted authority and, in the last analysis, by God himself. How often this happens here, at home!

Dear brothers and dear sisters, all of us have had the experience of getting lost, like that sheep, or of leaving God behind, like that younger son. These sins have caused us humiliation and for this very reason, by God’s grace, we were able to face them squarely. At this time in our lives, we need to pay greater attention to the fact that, in a formal sense, we are now living “at home”, within the walls of the institution, in the service of the Holy See, at the heart of the Church. Precisely for this reason, we could easily fall into the temptation of thinking we are safe, better than others, no longer in need of conversion.

Yet we are in greater danger than all others, because we are beset by the “elegant demon”, who does not make a loud entrance, but comes with flowers in his hand. Pardon me, brothers and sisters, if at times I say things that may sound harsh and pointed; it is not because I don’t believe in the value of kindness and persuasion. Rather, it is because it is good to keep our caresses for the weary and the oppressed, and to have the courage to “afflict the comfortable”, as the Servant of God Don Tonino Bello liked to say. For there are times when the comfort they enjoy is only the deception of the devil and not a gift of the Spirit.

6. I would like to say one last word about the subject of *peace*. Among the titles that the prophet Isaiah gives the Messiah is that of “Prince of Peace” (9:5). Never as at this time have we felt so great a desire for peace. I think of war-torn Ukraine, but also of the many ongoing conflicts in different parts of our world. War and violence are always a catastrophe. Religion must not lend itself to fueling conflicts. The Gospel is always a Gospel of peace, and in the name of no God can one declare a war to be “holy”.

Wherever death, division, conflict and innocent suffering reign, there we can recognize only the crucified Jesus. At this time, it is precisely to those who are suffering most greatly that I would like our thoughts to turn. We can be helped by the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who from his prison cell wrote: “Viewed from a Christian perspective, Christmas in a prison cell can, of course, hardly be considered particularly problematic. Most likely, many of those in this building will celebrate a more meaningful and authentic Christmas than in places where it is celebrated in name only. That misery, sorrow, poverty, loneliness, helplessness and guilt mean something quite

different in the eyes of God than according to human judgement; that God turns towards the very places from which men turn away; that Christ was born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn – a prisoner grasps this better than others, and for him this is truly good news” (*Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter to his Parents, 17 December 1943*).

7. Dear brothers and dear sisters, the culture of peace is not built up solely between peoples and nations. It begins in the heart of every one of us. Anguished as we are by the spread of wars and violence, we can and must make our own contribution to peace by striving to uproot from our hearts all hatred and resentment towards the brothers and sisters with whom we live. In the Letter to the Ephesians, we read these words, which are also found in the Office of Compline: “Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” (4:31-32). Let us ask ourselves: How much bitterness do we have in our hearts? What is feeding it? What is the source of the indignation that so often creates distances between us and fuels anger and resentment? Why is it that backbiting in all its forms becomes our only way of talking about the things around us?

If we truly want the din of war to cease and give way to peace, then each of us ought to begin with himself or herself. Saint Paul clearly tells us that *kindliness*, *mercy* and *forgiveness* are our medicine for building peace.

Kindliness means always choosing goodness in our way of relating with one another. Besides the violence of arms, there is also verbal violence, psychological violence, the violence of the abuse of power and the hidden violence of gossip, all of which are so deeply harmful and destructive. In the presence of the Prince of Peace who comes into the world, let us lay aside all weapons of every kind. May none of us profit from his or her position and role in order to demean others.

Mercy means accepting the fact that others also have their limits. Here too, it is fair to accept that individuals and institutions, precisely because they are human, are also limited. A Church that is pure and for the pure is only a return to the heresy of Catharism. Were that the case, the Gospel and the Bible as a whole would not have told us of limitations and shortcomings of many of those whom today we acknowledge as saints.

Finally, *forgiveness* means always giving others a second chance, in the realization that we become saints by fits and starts. God does this with every one of us; he keeps forgiving us; he keeps putting us back on our feet; he always gives us another chance. We ought to do the same. Brothers and sisters, God never tires of forgiving; we are the ones who tire of asking forgiveness.

For every war to end, forgiveness is required. Otherwise, justice becomes vengeance, and love is seen only as a form of weakness.

God became a Child, and that Child, once grown, let himself be nailed on a cross. There is nothing weaker than one who is crucified, yet that weakness became the demonstration of God’s supreme power. In forgiveness, God’s power is always at work. May *gratitude*, *conversion* and *peace* thus be the gifts of this Christmas.

I wish you all a happy Christmas! And once again, I ask you, please, not to forget to pray for me. Thank you!
