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GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square

Wednesday, 9 November 2016

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35. To visit the sick and the imprisoned

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Jesus' life, especially during the three years of his public ministry, was a continual encounter with people. Among them, the sick had a special place. How many pages of the Gospel tell of these encounters! The paralytic, the blind man, the leper, the possessed man, the epileptic, and the countless people suffering from illnesses of every kind.... Jesus made himself close to each of them, and cured them with his presence and his healing power. Therefore, among the works of mercy, we cannot fail to visit and assist those who are sick.

Together with this, we can also include being close to those who are in prison. Indeed, both the sick and the imprisoned live in conditions which limit their freedom. It is precisely when we lack [freedom] that we realize how precious it is! Jesus has given us the possibility of being free regardless of the limitations of illness and of restrictions. And he offers us the freedom which comes from an encounter with him, and the new sense which this brings to our personal conditions.

With this work of mercy, the Lord invites us to make an act of great humanity: *sharing* . Let us remember this word: sharing. Those who are sick often feel alone. We cannot hide the fact that, especially in our days, in sickness one experiences greater loneliness than at other times in life. A visit can make a person who is sick feel less alone, and a little companionship is great medicine! A smile, a caress, a handshake are simple gestures, but they are very important for those who feel abandoned. How many people dedicate themselves to visiting the sick in hospitals or in their homes! It is a priceless voluntary work. When it is done in the Lord's name, moreover, it also becomes an *eloquent and effective expression of mercy* . Let us not leave the sick alone! Let us not prevent them from finding consolation, or ourselves from being enriched by our closeness to those who suffer. Hospitals are true "cathedrals of suffering" where, however, the power of supportive and compassionate charity is also made evident.

In the same way, I think of those who are locked up in prison. Jesus has not forgotten them either. By including the act of visiting of those in prison among the works of mercy, he wanted first and foremost to invite us to judge no one. Of course, if someone is in prison it is because he has done wrong, and did not respect the law or civil harmony. Therefore, in prison, he is serving his sentence. However, whatever a detainee may have done, he remains always beloved by God. Who is able to enter the depths of [an inmate's] conscience to understand what he is experiencing? Who can understand his suffering and remorse? It is too easy to wash our hands, declaring that he has done wrong. A Christian is called, above all, to assume responsibility, so that whoever has done wrong understands the evil he has carried out, and returns to his senses. The absence of freedom is, without a doubt, one of the hardest pills for a human being to swallow. Add this to degradation arising from the conditions which are often devoid of humanity in which these persons live, it is then truly the case in which a Christian is motivated to do everything to restore his dignity.

Visiting people in prison is a work of mercy which, especially today, takes on a particular value due to the various forms of "justicialism" to which we are exposed. Therefore, let no one point a finger at another. Instead, let us all be instruments of mercy, and have attitudes of sharing and respect. I often think about detainees... I think of them often, I carry them in my heart. I wonder what led them to delinquency, and how they managed to succumb to various forms of evil. Yet, along with these thoughts, I feel that they all need closeness and tenderness, because God's mercy works wonders. How many tears I have seen shed on the cheeks of prisoners who had perhaps never wept before in their lives; and this is only because they feel welcomed and loved.

And let us not forget that even Jesus and his Apostles experienced imprisonment. In the account of the Passion, we know of the suffering which the Lord endured: captured, dragged about like a criminal, derided, scourged, crowned with thorns.... He, the sole Innocent! And even Saint Peter and Saint Paul were in prison (cf. Acts 12:5; Phil 1:12-17). Last Sunday afternoon — which was the Sunday of the Jubilee for Prisoners — a group of detainees from Padua came to visit me. I asked them what they were going to do the following day, before returning to Padua. They told me: “We will go to the Mamertine prison to share the experience of Saint Paul”. It was beautiful; hearing this did me good. These detainees wanted to find the imprisoned Paul. It was a beautiful thing, and it did me good. And even there, in prison, [Saints Peter and Paul] prayed and evangelized. The page from the Acts of the Apostles, which recounts Paul’s imprisonment, is moving: he felt alone, and wished that some of his friends would pay him a visit (cf. 2 Tim 4:9-15). He felt alone because the vast majority had left him alone... the great Paul.

These works of mercy, as you can see, are age-old, yet ever timely. Jesus left what he was doing to go and visit Peter’s mother-in-law; an age-old work of charity. Jesus did it.

Let us not fall into indifference, but become instruments of God’s mercy. All of us can be instruments of God’s mercy, and this will do more good to us than to others because mercy passes through a gesture, a word, a visit, and this mercy is an act of restoring the joy and dignity which has been lost.

Special greetings:

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today’s Audience, particularly those from England, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Vietnam, Canada and the United States of America. With prayerful good wishes that the present Jubilee of Mercy will be a moment of grace and spiritual renewal for you and your families, I invoke upon all of you joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

May the passage through the Holy Door remind each of you that only through Christ is it possible to enter into the love and mercy of the Father, who welcomes and forgives everyone.

I extend a particular greeting to *young people*, to *the sick*, and to *newlyweds*. Today, we celebrate the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica, the Cathedral of Rome. Pray for the Successor of the Apostle Peter, dear *young people*, in order that he may always confirm his brothers and sisters in the faith; may you feel the closeness of the Pope in prayer, dear *sick people*, in order to confront the trials of illness; may you teach your children the faith with simplicity, dear *newlyweds*, nourishing it with love for the Church and her shepherds.

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