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General audience: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you clothed me”

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you clothed me”. The Pope, continuing his reflections on the corporal works of mercy, dedicated this Wednesday’s catechesis during the general audience to these words of Jesus, in the Gospel of St. Matthew, reiterating that Christians recognise the countenance of Christ in those in need of help.

“The work of mercy that relates to strangers is, in our times, more relevant than ever”, he said. “The economic crisis, armed conflicts and climate changes compel many people to emigrate. However, migrations are not a new phenomenon, but belong to the history of humanity. To think they are specific only to our times denotes a lack of historical memory”.

The Bible provides many concrete examples of migration: Abraham, who heeds God’s call to leave his country for another: ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you’; the people of Israel, who from Egypt, where they were enslaved, walked through the desert for forty years until they reached the land promised by God. Even the Holy Family– Mary, Joseph and the child Jesus – was forced to emigrate to flee the threat of Herod, and remained in Egypt until the monarch’s death.

“The story of humanity is the story of migrations: here is no people at any latitude that has not known the migratory phenomenon”, Francis emphasised. “Throughout the centuries we have witnessed, in this regard, great expressions of solidarity, although social tensions have not been lacking. Today, the context of economic crisis unfortunately favours the emergence of closed attitudes and a lack of acceptance. In some parts of the world, walls and barriers are erected. At times it seems that the silent work of many men and women who, in different ways, make efforts to help and assist refugees and migrants, is obscured by the noise of others who give voice to an instinctive selfishness. But closing up is not a solution; rather, it ends up favouring criminal trafficking. The only way to a solution is that of solidarity. Solidarity with the migrant, solidarity with the stranger”.

“The commitment of Christians in this field is as urgent today as it was in the past. Looking at the last century alone, we recall St. Francesca Cabrini, who along with her companions dedicated her life to migrants to the United States of America. Today too we are in need of these witnesses so that mercy may reach the many who are in need. It is a commitment that involves everyone, without exception. Dioceses, parishes, institutes of consecrated life, associations and movements, as well as individual Christians: we are all called upon to

welcome our brothers and sisters who flee from war, hunger, violence and inhuman conditions of life. Together we are all a great force for supporting those who have lost their homeland, their family, their work and their dignity”.

Francis went on to relate the story of an event that took place a few days ago. “A refugee was asking for directions”, he said, “and a woman asked him what he was looking for. The refugee, who was without shoes, said he wanted to go to St. Peter’s Square to pass through the Holy Door. The woman thought, ‘But without shoes, how can he walk there?’ and hailed a taxi. The migrant was malodorous and taxi driver did not want him to enter the vehicle, but in the end accepted. The woman, seated next to him, asked him a little about his history as a refugee and a migrant, during the ten-minute journey. The man recounted his story of suffering, war, hunger and why he fled his country to migrate here. When they arrived, the woman opened her bag to pay the taxi driver but he, who at the beginning did not want the migrant to get in the taxi, said to the woman, ‘No, it is I who should pay you, because you enabled me to hear a story that has changed my heart’. This woman knew about the pain of a migrant, as she had Armenian blood and knew the suffering of her people. When we do something like this, at the beginning we refuse because it causes us discomfort, but at the end the story changes us. Let us think of this story and think about what we can do for refugees.

“And what does it mean to clothe the naked, if not to restore dignity to those who have lost it? Certainly, giving clothing to those who are in need; but let us think also of the women who are victims of trafficking, forced onto the streets, or of others; there are too many ways of using the human body as a commodity, even that of minors. It applies also to not having a job, a house, a just salary, or being discriminated against on the grounds of race or faith: they are all forms of ‘nakedness’, before which as Christians we are called to be attentive, watchful and ready to act”.

The Pope concluded his catechesis by exhorting those present not to “fall into the trap of being wrapped up in ourselves, indifferent to the needs of our brothers, and concerned only with our own interests. It is precisely in the measure to which we open ourselves to others that life becomes fruitful, society regains peace and people recover their full dignity”.
