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General audience: the relationship between hope and prayer

Pope Francis, continuing his cycle of catechesis dedicated to Christian hope, spoke during this Wednesday's general audience, held in the Paul VI Hall, on the relationship between this cardinal virtue and prayer, based on the biblical account of Jonah, a somewhat anomalous figure among the prophets of Israel, who tries to escape the call of the Lord by refusing to put himself in the service of the divine plan of salvation. His story is narrated in a little book of just four chapters, "a sort of parable that bears an important teaching, that of the mercy of God Who forgives".

"Jonah is an 'outgoing' prophet", Francis explains, "and also a prophet on the run! He is an outgoing prophet whom God sends 'to the periphery', to Nineveh, to convert the inhabitants of the city. But Nineveh, for an Israelite like Jonah, is a threatening place, the enemy that puts Jerusalem itself in danger, and is therefore to be destroyed, certainly not to save. Therefore, when God sends Jonah to preach in that city, the prophet, who knows the goodness of the Lord and His desire for forgive, tries to get out of his task and to flee. During his flight, the prophet enters into contact with the pagans, the sailors of the ship on which he embarked in order to get away from God and from His mission. And it is precisely the behaviour of these men, like that he will see in the inhabitants of Nineveh, that will enable him to reflect a little on the hope that, before the threat of death, is expressed in prayer".

"Indeed, during the sea crossing, a terrible storm erupts and Jonah descends into the hold of the ship and abandons himself to sleep. Instead, the sailors see that all is lost, and 'each cried out to his God. The captain of the ship awakens Jonah, saying to him: 'What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your God! Perhaps the God will give a thought to us, that we may not perish'. The reaction of these 'pagans' is the right reaction when faced with death, because it is then that man has a complete experience of his own fragility and his own need for salvation. The instinctive horror of dying unveils the need to hope in the God of life. 'Perhaps the God will give a thought for us, that we may not perish': they are the words of hope that becomes prayer, that plea full of anguish that rises to the lips of man when faced with the imminent danger of death".

"Too easily we disdain to turn to God when we are in need, as if it were only a self-interested prayer and therefore imperfect", the Pope observed. "But God knows our weakness; He knows that we remember Him to ask for help, and with the indulgent smile of a father He responds benevolently".

When Jonah, acknowledging his responsibilities, lets himself be thrown into the sea to save his travelling companions, the storm calms. “Incumbent death had led these pagan men to prayer, and ensured that the prophet, despite everything, lived his vocation in the service of others accepting to sacrifice himself for them, and now leads the survivors to the acknowledgement of the true Lord and praise. The sailors, who had prayed in fear to their gods, now with sincere fear of the Lord, acknowledge the true God and offer sacrifices and vows. Hope, which had led them to pray so as not to die, shows itself to be even more powerful and to bring a situation that goes far beyond what they had hoped for: not only do they not perish in the storm, but they are opened up to recognition of the true and sole Lord of heaven and earth”.

“Subsequently also the inhabitants of Nineveh, faced with the prospect of being destroyed, will pray, driven by hope in God’s forgiveness. They will repent, they will invoke the Lord and they will convert to Him, starting with the King who, like the captain of the ship, will give voice to hope, saying, ‘Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish’. For them too, as for the crew in the storm, having faced death and coming out alive led them to the truth. In this way, under divine mercy, and even more so in the light of the Pasqual mystery, death can become, as it was for St. Francis of Assisi, ‘our sister death’, and represent, for every man and for every one of us, the surprising opportunity to know hope and encounter the Lord. May the Lord enable us to understand this bond between prayer and hope. Prayer carries you ahead in hope, and when things become dark, then more prayer is needed! And there will be more hope. Thank you”.
