

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE



BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS

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N. 170201a

Wednesday 01.02.2017

General audience: We will be with the Lord forever

In the last catecheses we began our journey on the theme of hope, rereading several pages of the Old Testament from this perspective. Now we would like to shed light on the extraordinary scope that this virtue assumes in the New Testament, when it encounters the newness represented by Jesus Christ and the Paschal event: Christian hope. We Christians, we are women and men of hope.

It emerges clearly from the first text written, that is, the First Letter of St. Paul to the Thessalonians. In the passage we have heard, we perceive all the freshness and the beauty of the first Christian proclamation. The Thessalonians were a young community, founded shortly beforehand; yet, despite difficulties and many trials, it is rooted in faith and celebrates with enthusiasm and joy the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The Apostle therefore rejoices wholeheartedly with them in, inasmuch as those who are reborn at Easter truly become “children of light, children of the day”.

When Paul writes to them, the community of Thessalonica had just been founded, and just a few years separate this event from the Easter of Jesus. Therefore, the Apostle tries to make them understand all the effects and consequences of this unique and decisive event, the resurrection of the Lord, for history and for the life of every person. In particular, the community’s difficulty was not acknowledging Jesus’ resurrection – everyone believed in this – but rather believing in the resurrection of the dead. Yes, Jesus was resurrected, but the difficulty was believing that the dead rise again. In this sense, this letter is more relevant than ever. Every time we find ourselves facing our death, or that of a loved one, we feel that our faith is put to the test. All our doubts and our fragility emerge, and we ask ourselves, “But will there really be life after death? Will I be able to see and embrace again the people I have loved?” A woman asked me this question a few days ago in an audience, expressing a doubt: “Will I meet my family?” We too, in the current context, need to return to the root and the foundation of our faith, so as to become aware of what God accomplished for us in Jesus Christ, and what our death means. We all have some fear of this uncertainty of death. It brings to mind an elderly man, a good man, who said, “I am not afraid of death. I am a bit afraid of seeing it come”. We are afraid of this.

Paul, faced with the fears and the perplexity of the community, invites it to wear “hope in salvation” firmly on their heads like a helmet, especially in the trials and in the most difficult moments of our life. It is a helmet. This, here, is Christian hope. When we speak about hope, we can be led to understand it according to the common acceptance of the term, or rather with reference to something good that we desire, but that may be realised or

not. We hope that it will happen; it is like a wish. We say, for example, "I hope the weather will be good tomorrow!" but we know that the day after the weather may instead be bad. ... Christian hope is not like that. Christian hope is the expectation of something that has already been accomplished; there is the door there, and I hope to reach the door. What must I do? Walk towards the door! I am sure that I will arrive at the door. This is what Christian hope is like: having the certainty that I am journeying towards something that is there, not something I want to be there. This is Christian hope. Christian hope is awaiting something that has already been accomplished and that will certainly be fulfilled for each one of us. Our resurrection too, and that of our loved ones, therefore, is not something that may or may not happen, but is a certain reality, inasmuch as it is rooted in the event of Christ's resurrection. Hoping therefore means learning to live in expectation. Learning to live in expectation and finding life. When a woman learns she is pregnant, every day she learns to live awaiting the moment she will see the child to come. In this way we too must live and learn from these human expectations, and to live awaiting the moment we will see and encounter the Lord. This is not easy, but it can be learned: to live in waiting. To hope means and implies a humble heart, a poor heart. Only a poor person knows how to wait. Those who are already full of themselves and their possessions, does not know how to place their trust in anyone other than themselves.

Paul writes, again, "He [Jesus] died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him". These words are always a source of great consolation and peace. Also for our loved ones who have left us, we are therefore called to pray so that they live in Christ and are in full communion with us. Something that greatly touched my heart is an expression of St. Paul, again addressed to the Thessalonians. It fills me with the certainty of hope. He says, "and so we will always be with the Lord". It is beautiful: everything passes but, after death, we will be with the Lord forever. It is the total certainty of hope, the same hope that long ago, made Job exclaim; "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will stand upon the earth ... Whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold". And so we will be with the Lord forever. Do you believe this? I ask you: do you believe this? To have a little strength, I invite you to say three times with me: "And so we will be with the Lord forever". And there, with the Lord, we will encounter one other.
