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General audience: Christian hope, wellspring of mutual help and consolation

In his catechesis during today's general audience, which took place in the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father continued his reflection on St. Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians, focusing on the community and ecclesial dimension of Christian hope. "We all hope, we all have hope, also as a community", said the Pope.

The Apostle extends his perspective to all the members of the Christian community, asking them to pray for and to support each other. "But not just helping each other in our needs, in the many needs of daily life, but helping each other in hope, supporting each other in hope. And it is not by chance that he begins precisely by referring to those to whom the responsibility for pastoral guidance is entrusted. They are the first to be called to nurture hope, and not because they are better than the others, but by virtue of the divine ministry that goes well beyond their own strengths. For this reason, they are in need of the respect, understanding and benevolent support of all".

St. Paul then turns his attention to those who run the risk of losing their hope and of falling prey to desperation: "We always hear of people who fall into desperation and do bad things. ... Desperation leads them to many bad things", Francis observed, noting that the Apostle refers to "the discouraged, the weak, those who are dejected as a result of the burdens of life and their own shortcomings, and are no longer able to lift themselves up. "In these cases, the closeness and warmth of all the Church must be even more intense and loving, and must assume the exquisite form of compassion, which is not forbearance: compassion means to suffer with others, to be close to those who suffer, with a word, a caress, that comes from the heart: this is compassion, for those who are in need of comfort and consolation. This is more important than ever: Christian hope cannot dispense with genuine and concrete charity. The same Apostle of the people, in his Letter to the Romans, affirms with his heart in his hand, 'We who are strong – who have faith and hope, and do not have many difficulties – have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves' (15,1). This witness does not then remain closed within the confines of the Christian community: it resonates with all its vigour well beyond, in the social and civil context, as an appeal not to create bridges, not walls; not to repay evil with evil, but to conquer evil with good and offence with forgiveness – the Christian can never say, you will pay for this! – offence is conquered with forgiveness, and to live in peace with all. This is the Church! And this is what Christian hope does, when it takes on the strong and at the same time tender features of love. Love is strong and tender".

But one cannot learn to hope alone. "Hope, to be nurtured, must necessarily have a 'body' in which the various

members support and revive each other. This means, then, if we hope it is because many of our brothers and sisters have taught us to hope, and have kept our hope alive. And prominent among these are the small, the poor, the simple and the marginalised. Yes, because a person who is wrapped up in his own wellbeing: he hopes only for his own wellbeing and this is not hope, it is relative security; those who are wrapped up in their own fulfilment, who feel that everything is always fine, do not know hope. Instead, those who experience hardships, precariousness and their own limits every day, know hope. These brothers of ours give us the strongest and most beautiful witness, as they remain steadfast in their trust in the Lord, knowing that, beyond sadness, oppression and the inevitability of death, the final word will be His, and it will be a word of mercy, life and peace". Those who hope, hope to hear this word one day: 'Come, come to me, brother; come, come to me, sister, for all eternity'".

If the "natural home of hope is a united body, in the case of Christian hope this body is the Church, while the vital breath, the soul of this hope is the Holy Spirit. This, therefore, is why the Apostle Paul invites us in the end to invoke Him continually. If it is not easy to believe, it is even harder to hope. It is more difficult to hope than to believe, much more difficult", the Pope affirmed. "But when the Holy Spirit dwells in our hearts, it is He Who enables us to believe that we must not fear, that the Lord is near and will care for us; and it is He Who models our communities, in a perennial Pentecost, as living signs of hope for the human family".
