

CATECHESSES
ON THE
ACTS OF
THE APOSTLES

(29 May 2019 – 15 January 2020)

POPE FRANCIS

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— CHAPTER I —

The Word and the Spirit

*St Peter's Square
Wednesday, 29 May 2019*

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today we begin a series of catecheses through the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. This biblical book, written by Saint Luke the Evangelist, speaks to us about the *journey* — of a journey: but what journey? Of the journey — *of the Gospel in the world*, and it shows us the marvellous bond between the Word of God and the Holy Spirit, who inaugurates the time of evangelization. The protagonists of the Acts are in fact a lively and effective “pair”: the Word and the Spirit.

God “sends forth his command to the earth”, says the Psalm (147:15). The Word of God runs swiftly; it is dynamic; it irrigates all terrain onto which it falls. And what is its strength? Saint Luke tells us that human words become effective not thanks to rhetoric, which is the art of fine speech, but thanks to the Holy Spirit, who is God’s *dýnamis*, God’s dynamic, his force, who has the power to purify the word, to render it a bearer of life. For example, in the Bible there are histories, human words; but what is the difference between the Bible and a history book? That the words of the Bible are taken by the Holy

Spirit who gives a very powerful impulse, a different force, and helps us so that this word may be the seed of holiness, the seed of life, that it be effective. When the Spirit visits the human word it becomes dynamic, like “dynamite”, that is, capable of kindling hearts and of shattering schemes, resistance and walls of division, opening new paths and expanding the borders of the People of God. And we will see this in the course of these catecheses, in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles.

The One who gives vibrant resonance and decisiveness to our human word — so fragile and even capable of lying and of shirking one’s own responsibilities — is the Holy Spirit alone, through whom the Son of God was begotten; the Spirit who anointed him and supported him in the mission; the Spirit thanks to whom he chose his Apostles and who guaranteed perseverance and fruitfulness to their proclamation, as he guarantees to our proclamation even today.

The Gospel concludes with the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus, and the narrative plot of the Acts of the Apostles begins precisely here, from the great abundance of the Risen One’s life which permeates his Church. Saint Luke says that Jesus “presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). The Risen One, the Risen Jesus makes the most human gestures, such as sharing

a meal with his own and he invites them to live in confident expectation of the fulfilment of the promise of the Father: “you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (1:5).

Baptism in the Holy Spirit, in fact, is the experience that allows us to enter into personal communion with God and to participate in his universal salvific will, acquiring the endowment of *parrhesia*, courage, which is the capacity to pronounce a word “as children of God”, not just as men, but as children of God: a clear, free, effective word, full of love for Christ and for brothers and sisters.

Thus, there is no need to struggle to earn or deserve God’s gift. Everything is given *freely* and *in good time*. The Lord gives everything freely. Salvation is not bought; one does not pay: it is a freely given gift. Before the fret to know in advance the time in which the events he announced will take place, Jesus responds to his own: “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (1:7-8).

The Risen One invites his own not to live the present with anxiety, but to make a covenant with time, to be able to await the unfolding of a sacred history that is not interrupted but that advances, always moves forward; to be able to

await the “steps” of God, Lord of time and space. The Risen One invites his own not to “fabricate” the mission themselves, but to wait for the Father to dynamize their hearts with his Spirit, so as to be able to engage in a missionary witness capable of shining from Jerusalem to Samaria and to transcend the confines of Israel in order to reach the world’s peripheries.

The Apostles experience that expectation together; they live it as the Lord’s family, in the Upper Room, or Cenacle, the walls of which still bear witness to the gift by which Jesus consigned himself to his own in the Eucharist. And how do they await the power, the *dýnamis* of God? By praying with perseverance, as if they were not many but *one*. By praying in unity and with perseverance. Indeed, it is with prayer that isolation, temptation, suspicion are defeated and the heart opens to communion. The presence of the women and of Mary, Jesus’ mother, intensifies this experience: they were the first to learn from the Teacher how to witness to the faithfulness of love and the power of the communion that conquers all fear.

Let us too ask the Lord for the patience to await his steps, to not wish to “fabricate” his work ourselves and to remain docile by praying, invoking the Spirit and cultivating the art of ecclesial communion.

— CHAPTER II —

**Communion and the Re-consolidation
of the Apostolic College**

*St Peter's Square
Wednesday, 12 June 2019*

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

We have begun a series of catecheses that will follow the ‘journey’: the journey of the Gospel narrative from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, because this Book certainly shows the journey of the Gospel, how the Gospel has gone further, and further, and further.... *Everything starts with the Resurrection of Christ.* Indeed, this is not one event among others, but is the source of new life. The disciples know it and — obedient to Jesus’ command — remain united, in harmony, and steadfast in prayer. They are close to Mary, the Mother, and prepare to receive God’s power, not passively but by strengthening the communion among themselves.

That first community was formed of 120 brothers and sisters, more or less: a number that contains within it the number 12, emblematic of Israel — because it represents the 12 tribes — and emblematic of the Church, with reference to the *12 Apostles chosen by Jesus.* But now, after the agonizing events of the Passion, the Lord’s Apostles are no longer 12, but 11. One of them,

Judas, is no longer there. He has taken his own life, crushed by remorse.

He had previously begun to separate himself from the communion with the Lord and with the others, to be self-serving, to isolate himself, to become attached to money to the extent of exploiting the poor, losing sight of the horizon of gratuitousness and self-giving, to the point of allowing the virus of pride to infect his mind and heart, transforming him from “friend” (Mt 26:50) into enemy and into “guide to those who arrested Jesus” (Acts 1:16). Judas had received the great grace of belonging to the group of Jesus’ confidants and participating in His very ministry, but at a certain point he aspired to ‘save’ his own life by himself with the result of losing it (cf. Lk 9:24). He ceased to belong wholeheartedly to Jesus and placed himself outside of the communion with Him and with His own. He stopped being a disciple and placed himself above the Master. He sold Him and with the “reward of his wickedness” bought a field, which produced no fruit but was soaked with his own blood (cf. Acts 1:18-19).

While Judas preferred death to life (cf. Dt 30:19; Sir 15:17) and followed the example of the wicked whose way is like darkness and will perish (cf. Prov 4:19; Ps 1:6), the Eleven instead choose life and benediction, becoming responsible for making life in their turn flow through

history, from generation to generation, from the people of Israel to the Church.

The Evangelist Luke shows us that, faced with the desertion of one of the Twelve, which inflicted a wound on the community body, it is imperative that his responsibility be passed on to another. And who could assume it? Peter indicates the qualification: the new member had to be a disciple of Jesus from the beginning, that is, from His Baptism in the Jordan to the end, namely, His Ascension into Heaven (cf. Acts 1:21-22). The group of Twelve must be restored. At this point begins the practice of *community discernment*, which consists in seeing reality with the eyes of God, with a view to unity and communion.

There are two candidates: Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias. So the entire community prays in this way: “Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men, show which one of these two thou hast chosen to take the place ... from which Judas turned aside” (Acts 1:24-25). And, by casting lots, the Lord indicates Matthias, who becomes affiliated with the Eleven. Thus the body of the Twelve, is restored, a sign of communion; and communion overcomes divisions, isolation, the mentality that absolutizes private space; a sign that *community is the first witness* that the Apostles offer. Jesus had said to them: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35).

In the Acts of the Apostles the Twelve manifest the Lord's way. They are accredited witnesses to Christ's work of salvation and do not show the world their presumed perfection but rather, through the grace of unity, enable the emergence of an Other who now lives in a new manner in the midst of his people. And who is this? It is the Lord Jesus. The Apostles choose to live under the lordship of the Risen One in unity among the brethren, which becomes the only possible context of authentic self-giving.

We too need to rediscover the beauty of witnessing to the Risen One, by leaving behind self-referential attitudes, by ceasing to hold back the gifts of God and by not giving in to mediocrity. The re-consolidation of the Apostolic College shows how, in the DNA of the Christian community, there can be unity and freedom from self, which enable one not to fear diversity, not to be attached to things and gifts, and to become *martyrs*, that is, luminous witnesses to the living God who works in history.

— CHAPTER III —

Pentecost: the Irruption of the Holy Spirit

*St Peter's Square
Wednesday, 19 June 2019*

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Fifty days after Easter, in that Upper Room which is by this time their home and where the presence of Mary, the Lord's mother is the bonding factor, the Apostles experience an event that exceeds their expectations. Gathered in prayer — prayer is the 'lung' that gives breath to the disciples of all times; without prayer one cannot be a disciple of Jesus, without prayer we cannot be Christian! It is the air, it is the lungs of Christian life — they are surprised by *God's irruption*. It is an *irruption that does not tolerate what is closed: it thrusts open the doors* through the strength of a wind that recalls *ruah*, the primordial breath and fulfills the promise of "power" made by the Risen One before he takes his leave (cf. Acts 1:8). Suddenly from on high, "a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting" (Acts 2:2).

The wind is then joined by fire which recalls the burning bush and Sinai with the gift of the ten words (cf. Ex 19:16-19). In biblical tradition, fire accompanies the manifestation of God. It is in fire that God delivers his living and active

word (cf. Heb 4:12) that opens to the future; fire symbolically expresses his work of heating, illuminating and probing hearts, his care in testing the endurance of human works, purifying and renewing them. While we hear God's voice on Sinai, during the feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem, it is Peter who speaks, the rock on which Christ chose to build his Church. His word, weak and even capable of denying the Lord, filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit, gains strength, it becomes capable of piercing hearts and moving to conversion. Indeed God chooses what is foolish in the world in order to confound the wise (cf. 1 Cor 1:27).

The Church is thus born from the fire of love and from a "fire" that blazes on Pentecost and manifests the power of the Word of the Risen One imbued with the Holy Spirit. *The new and definitive Covenant is no longer founded on a law that is written on two stone tablets, but on the action of the Spirit of God which makes all things new and is etched on hearts of flesh.*

The word of the Apostles is filled with the Spirit of the Risen One and becomes a new, different word which however can be understood, almost as if it were translated simultaneously into all languages: Indeed "each one heard them speaking in their own language" (Acts 2:6) . It is the *language of truth and love* which is the *universal language*: even illiterate people can understand it. Everyone understands the language of truth

and love. If you go with the truth in your heart, with sincerity, and go with love, everyone will understand you. Even if you cannot speak, but with a caress that is true and loving.

Not only does the Holy Spirit manifest himself via *a symphony of sounds that unite and harmonize the various parts*, but he also presents himself as an orchestra conductor who directs the performance of the scores of praises for God's "great works". The Holy Spirit is the *architect of communion, he is the artist of reconciliation who knows how to remove the barriers* between Hebrews and Greeks, between slaves and free people, in order to make them a single body. He edifies the community of believers, harmonizing the body and the multiplicity of limbs. He makes the Church grow, helping it to exceed human limitations, sin and any scandal whatsoever.

The astonishment is great, and some might wonder if those men are inebriated. Then Peter intervenes on behalf of all the Apostles and re-reads that event in the light of Joel 3, where a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit is announced. Followers of Jesus are not inebriated, but experience what Saint Ambrose defined as "the sober inebriation of the Spirit", which through dreams and visions kindles prophesy among the People of God. This prophetic gift is not reserved to only a few, but to all those who invoke the name of the Lord.

Henceforth, from that moment, the Spirit of God moves hearts to receive the salvation that passes through one Person, Jesus Christ, the One whom men nailed to the wood of the Cross and whom God raised from the dead, “having loosed the pangs of death” (Acts 2:24). He is the One who emanated that Spirit who composes the polyphony of praises and whom everyone can hear. As Benedict XVI stated: “Pentecost is this: Jesus, and through him God himself, actually comes to us and draws us to himself” (Homily, 3 June 2006). The Spirit works through divine attraction: God captivates us with his Love and thus engages us, in order to move history and set in motion the processes through which new life seeps in. Indeed, only the Spirit of God has the power to *humanize and create fraternity* in every context, beginning with those who welcome him.

Let us ask the Lord to enable us to experience a new Pentecost, which expands our hearts and harmonizes our sentiments with Christ’s, so that we may proclaim without shame his transformative Word and witness to the power of the love that beckons to life all that it encounters.

— CHAPTER IV —

**The Paradigm for Every
Christian Community**

*St Peter's Square
Wednesday, 26 June 2019*

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

The fruit of Pentecost, the powerful outpouring of the *Spirit of God upon the first Christian community*, was that many people felt their heart pierced by the Good News — the *kerygma* — of salvation in Christ, and they freely adhered to him, converting, receiving baptism in his name and in turn, welcoming the gift of the Holy Spirit. About 3,000 people joined that fraternity which is the *habitat* of believers and is the ecclesial leaven for the work of evangelization. The warmth of the faith of these brothers and sisters in Christ makes their lives the *landscape of God's work* which, through the Apostles, is manifested with miracle and signs. What is extraordinary becomes ordinary, and *everyday life becomes the site of the manifestation of living Christ*.

The evangelist Luke narrates this to us by showing us *the Church of Jerusalem as the paradigm for every Christian community*, as the icon of a fraternity which attracts and should neither be idealized nor minimized. The narrative in the *Acts of the Apostles* allows us to look within the

walls of the *domus* where the first Christians gather as *God's family*, the space for *koinonia*, that is, of the communion of love among brothers and sisters in Christ. We can see that they live in a very precise way: they “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). The Christians listen assiduously to the *didaché*, the apostolic teaching; they apply a high level of quality in their interpersonal relationships also through sharing spiritual and material goods; they remember the Lord through the “*breaking of bread*”, that is, the Eucharist, and they dialogue with God in *prayer*. These are the attitudes of a Christian, the four marks of a good Christian.

Unlike human society which tends to follow its own interests regardless or even to the detriment of others, the community of believers rejects individualism in favour of sharing and solidarity. There is no room for egoism in a Christian’s soul: if your heart is selfish you are not Christian, you are worldly and only seek your own favour, your own advantage. And Luke tells us that the believers are *together* (cf. Acts 2:44). Closeness and unity are the style of believers: close, concerned for each other, not to speak ill of the other, no, but to help, to get closer.

The grace of Baptism thus reveals the intimate bond between the brothers and sisters in Christ

who are called to *share*, to empathize with others and to give “as any had need” (Acts 2:45), that is, generosity, charity, concern for the other, visiting the sick, visiting those in need who need comforting.

And this fraternity, precisely because it chooses the way of communion and attention to the needy, this fraternity that is the Church can live an *authentic and true liturgical life*. Luke says: “And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people” (Acts 2:46-47).

Lastly, the narrative in the Acts of the Apostles reminds us that the Lord guarantees the growth of the community (cf. 2:47); the believers’ perseverance in a genuine covenant with God and with their brothers and sisters becomes an attractive force that fascinates and wins over many (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 14), a principle that, thanks to which, the community of believers of all times lives.

Let us pray to the Holy Spirit that he make our communities places in which to gather and exercise the new life, works of solidarity and of communion, places in which liturgies are an encounter with God that becomes communion with brothers and sisters, places that are open doors to the heavenly Jerusalem.

— CHAPTER V —

Bearing Witness through Concrete Actions

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 7 August 2019

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

In the Acts of the Apostles, preaching the Gospel does not rely simply on words, but also on the concrete actions that bear witness to the truth of the Good News. It is a case of “wonders and signs” (Acts 2:43) performed by the Apostles, confirming their word and demonstrating that they act in the name of Christ. Thus the Apostles interceded and Christ “worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it” (Mk 16:20). Many signs, many miracles that the Apostles performed were indeed a manifestation of the divinity of Jesus.

Today we find ourselves before the first account of healing, before a miracle which is the first account of healing in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. It has a clear *missionary aim* which seeks to kindle faith. Peter and John go to pray at the Temple, the centre of Israel’s experience of faith, to which the early Christians were firmly attached. The first Christians used to pray in the Temple in Jerusalem. Luke records the time: it is the ninth hour, that is 3:00 PM, when the sacrifice is offered as a sign of the people’s communion with their God; and also the time at which Jesus died, offering himself “once for all”

(Heb 9:12; 10:10). And at the Temple door which is referred to as “Beautiful” — the Beautiful door — they see a beggar, a man paralyzed from birth. Why was that man at the door? Because the law of Moses (cf. Lv 21:18) forbade the offering of sacrifices by people with physical disabilities, which were believed to be the consequence of some sin. Let us remember that, faced with a man who was blind from birth, the people had asked Jesus: “who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (Jn 9:2). According to that mindset, there was always a sin at the root of a deformity. And later, they were even denied access to the Temple. The lame man, the paradigm of society’s many excluded and rejected, is there begging for alms, as he does every day. He cannot enter but he is at the door; when something unexpected happens: Peter and John arrive and an *exchange of glances* is sparked. The lame man looks at the two to beg for alms. The Apostles instead fix their gaze on him, inviting him *to look at them in a different way, to receive a different gift*. The lame man looks at them and Peter says to him: “I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk” (cf. Acts 3:6). The Apostles have established a relationship because this is the way that God loves to manifest himself, in *relationships*, always in dialogue, always in the apparitions, always with the heart’s inspiration: they are God’s relationships with us; through a

true interpersonal encounter which can happen through love.

In addition to being the religious centre, the Temple was also a place for economic and financial exchange. The prophets and Jesus himself had often lashed out against this abasement (cf. Lk 19:45-46). How often I think of this when I see parishes that think money is more important than the Sacraments! Please! A poor Church: Let us ask the Lord for this. In meeting the Apostles, that beggar does not find money but he finds *the Name that saves man: Jesus Christ, the Nazarene*. Peter invokes Jesus' name, he commands the paralyzed man to stand upright like the living; standing, and he touches this ill person, that is, he takes him by the hand and raises him up, a gesture in which Saint John Chrysostom sees "an image of Resurrection" (*Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles*, 8). And here appears a portrait of the Church that sees those in difficulty, that does not close her eyes, that knows how to look humanity in the face in order to create meaningful relationships, bridges of friendship and solidarity in place of barriers. The face of "a Church without frontiers" appears, "a Church which considers herself mother to all" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 210), that knows how to take one by the hand in order to raise — not to condemn. Jesus always extends his hand, always tries to raise, so as to ensure that people may heal, be happy and encounter God. It is the "art of accompaniment" which is characterized by the delicacy with which one approaches "the sacred ground of the

other”, giving the journey a pace that is “steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life” (*ibid.*, 169). And this is what these two Apostles do with the lame man: they look at him, they say “look at us”, they extend a hand, they induce him to stand up and they heal him. This is what Jesus does with all of us. Let us think about this when we experience bad moments, moments of sin, moments of sadness. There is Jesus who says, “Look at me: I am here!”. Let us take Jesus’ hand and allow ourselves to be raised up.

Peter and John teach us not to put our trust in the means, though they are useful, but rather in the true richness which is our relationship with the Risen One. Indeed we are — as Saint Paul would say — “poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (2 Cor 6:10). Our all is the Gospel which manifests the power of the name of Jesus who performs miracles.

And we — each of us —, what do we possess? What is our wealth, what is our treasure? With what can we make others rich? Let us ask the Father for the gift of a memory that is grateful in recollecting the benefits of his love in our life, to give everyone the witness of praise and gratitude. Let us not forget: a hand always outstretched to help the other to stand up; it is the hand of Jesus who, through our hand, helps others to stand.

— CHAPTER VI —

***Koinonia: Sharing in Common,
Being a Community***

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 21 August 2019*

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good Morning!

The Christian community is born from the superabundant outpouring of the Holy Spirit and it grows thanks to the leaven of sharing among brothers and sisters in Christ. There is a dynamism of *solidarity* which builds up the Church as the family of God, for whom the experience of *koinonia* is central. What does this strange word mean? It is a Greek word which means “pooling one’s goods”, “sharing in common”, being a community, not isolated. This is the experience of the first Christian community, that is, “communality”, “sharing”, “communicating”, “participating”, not isolation. In the primitive Church, this *koinonia*, this communality, refers primarily to participation in the Body and Blood of Christ. This is why when we receive Holy Communion, we say that “we communicate”, we enter into communion with Jesus, and from this communion with Jesus we reach a communion with our brothers and sisters. And this communion in the Body and Blood of Christ that we share during Holy Mass translates into fraternal union and, therefore also into what is most

difficult for us; pooling our resources and collecting money for the mother Church in Jerusalem (cf. Rm 12:13, 2 Cor 8-9) and the other Churches. If you want to know whether you are good Christians, you have to pray, try to draw near to Communion, to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. But the sign that your heart has converted is when conversion reaches the pocket, when it touches one's own interests. That is when one can see whether one is generous to others, if one helps the weakest, the poorest. When conversion achieves this, you are sure that it is a true conversion. If you stop at words, it is not a real conversion.

Eucharistic life, prayer, the preaching of the Apostles and the experience of communion (cf. Acts 2:42) turn believers into a multitude of people who — the Book of the Acts of the Apostles says — are of “one heart and soul” and who do not consider their property their own, but hold everything in common (cf. Acts 4:32). It is such a powerful example of life that it helps us to be generous and not miserly. This is why the Book says, “there was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need” (Acts 4:34-35). The Church has always had this gesture of Christians who stripped themselves of the things they had in excess, the things that were not necessary, in order to give them to

those in need. And not just money: also time. How many Christians — you for example, here in Italy — how many Christians do volunteer work! This is beautiful. It is communion, sharing one's time with others to help those in need. And thus: volunteer work, charity work, visits to the sick; we must always share with others and not just seek after our own interests.

In this way, the community, or *koinonia*, becomes the *new way of relating among the Lord's disciples*. Christians experience a new way of being and behaving among themselves. And it is the proper Christian method, to such an extent that Gentiles would look at Christians and remark: "Look at how they love each other!". Love was the method. But not love in word, not false love: love in works, in helping one another, concrete love, the concreteness of love. The Covenant with Christ establishes a bond among brothers and sisters which merges and expresses itself in the communion of material goods too. Yes this method of being together, of loving this way, 'up to the pocket', also brings one to strip oneself of the hindrance of money and to give it to others, going against one's own interests. Being the limbs of the Body of Christ makes believers share the responsibility for one another. Being believers in Jesus makes us all responsible for each other. "But look at that one, the problem he has. I don't care, it's his business". No, among Christians we cannot say:

“poor thing, he has a problem at home, he is going through this family problem”. But “I have to pray, I take him with me, I am not indifferent”. This is being Christian. This is why the strong support the weak (cf. Rom 15:1) and no one experiences poverty that humiliates and disfigures human dignity because they live in this community: having one heart in common. They love one another. This is the sign: concrete love.

James, Peter and John, the three Apostles who were the “pillars” of the Church in Jerusalem, take a decision in common that Paul and Barnabas would evangelise the Gentiles while they evangelised the Hebrews, and they only asked Paul and Barnabas for one condition: not to forget the poor, to remember the poor (cf. Gal 2:9-10) Not only the material poor, but also the poor in spirit, the people with difficulty who need our closeness. A Christian always begins with him/herself, from his/her own heart and approaches others as Jesus approached us. This was the first Christian community.

A practical example of sharing and communion of goods comes to us from the testimony of Barnabas. He owns a field and sells it in order to give the proceeds to the Apostles (cf. Acts 4:36-37). But beside this positive example, there is another that is sadly negative: After selling their land, Ananias and his wife Sapphira decide to hand over only part of the proceeds to the Apostles and to keep part of the proceeds for

themselves (cf. Acts 5:1-2). This deceit interrupts the chain of freely sharing, serene and disinterested sharing and the consequences are tragic. They are fatal (Acts 5:5-10). The Apostle Peter exposes Ananias and his wife's deceit and says to them: "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? ... You have not lied to men but to God" (Acts 5:3-4). We could say that Ananias lied to God because of an isolated conscience, a hypocritical conscience, that is due to an ecclesial belonging that is "negotiated", partial and opportunistic. Hypocrisy is the worst enemy of this Christian community, of this Christian love: pretending to love each other but only seeking one's own interests.

Falling short of sincere sharing, indeed, falling short of the sincerity of love means cultivating hypocrisy, distancing oneself from the truth, becoming selfish, extinguishing the fire of communion and choosing the frost of inner death. Those who behave in this manner transit in the Church like a tourist. There are many tourists in the Church who are always passing through but never enter the Church. It is spiritual tourism that leads them to believe they are Christians whereas they are only tourists of the catacombs. No, we should not be tourists in the Church but rather one another's brothers and sisters. A life based only on drawing gain and advantages from situations to the detriment of others, inevitably causes inner death. And how

many people say they are close to the Church, friends of priests, of bishops, while they only seek their own interests. Such hypocrisy destroys the Church!

May the Lord — I ask this for all of us — pour over us his Spirit of tenderness which vanquishes all hypocrisy and generates that truth that nourishes Christian solidarity, which, far from being an activity of social work, is the inalienable expression of the Church, the most tender mother of all, especially of the poorest.

— CHAPTER VII —

Peter, Principal Witness of the Risen One

Wednesday, 28 August 2019

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

The ecclesial community described in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles is full of so much richness made available by the Lord — the Lord is generous! It experiences a growth in numbers and great success, despite external attacks. In order to show us this vitality, Luke, in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, also mentions significant places, such as Solomon’s Portico (cf. Acts 5:12), a meeting place for believers. The portico (*stoà*) is an open gallery that serves as a shelter, and as a place of encounter and witness. In fact, Luke makes a point of [narrating] the signs and wonders that accompany the Apostles’ words and the special care of the sick to whom they devote themselves.

In Chapter 5 of the Acts, the nascent Church shows that it is like a “field hospital” that welcomes the weakest, that is, the sick. Their suffering attracts the Apostles, who possess “no silver and gold” (Acts 3:6) — so says Peter to the cripple — but are strong in the name of Jesus. In their eyes, as in the eyes of Christians of all times, the sick are privileged recipients of the Good News of the Kingdom; they are brothers and sisters in whom Christ is present in a special

way, so that they may be sought and found by all of us (cf. Mt 25:36, 40). The sick are privileged for the Church, for the priestly heart, for all the faithful. They are not to be discarded. On the contrary, they are to be healed, to be cared for. They are the object of Christian concern.

Among the Apostles, stands out Peter, who has pre-eminence in the apostolic group because of the primacy (cf. Mt 16:18) and mission received from the Risen One (cf. Jn 21:15-17). It is he who began preaching the *kerygma* on the Day of Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:14-41) and who plays a leading role at the Council of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 15 and Gal 2:1-10).

Peter approaches the stretchers and walks among the sick, as Jesus had done, taking their infirmities and diseases upon himself (cf. Mt 8:17; Is 53:4). And Peter, the fisherman from Galilee, passes through, but he lets Another manifest himself: that is the Christ alive and working! Indeed, the witness is whoever manifests Christ, both in words and with physical presence, who allows him to engage and to be an extension of the Verb made flesh in history.

Peter is the one who carries out the works of the Teacher (cf. Jn 14:12): looking to him with faith, one sees Christ himself. Filled with the Spirit of his Lord, Peter passes through and, without doing anything, his shadow becomes a healing “caress”, a communication of health, an effusion

of the tenderness of the Risen One who bends over the sick and restores life, salvation and dignity. In this way, God manifests his proximity and makes his children's wounds "the theological place of God's tenderness" (Morning meditation, *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, 14 December 2017). In the wounds of the sick, in the illnesses that are a hindrance to going forward in life, there is always the presence of Jesus, the wound of Jesus. There is Jesus who calls each of us to care for them, support them and heal them.

The healing action of Peter stirs the hatred and envy of the Sadducees, who imprison the Apostles and, upset by their mysterious deliverance, forbid them to teach. These people saw the miracles the Apostles performed, not through magic, but in the name of Jesus, but they did not want to accept this and so they imprisoned and beat them. They were then miraculously freed, but the heart of the Sadducees was so hard that they did not want to believe what they saw. Peter then responds by offering a key [aspect] of Christian life: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Because they — the Sadducees — say: "You should not continue doing these things, you should not heal" — "I obey God before men": it is the great Christian reply. This means listening to God without reserve, delay, calculation; adhering to Him in order to be able to have a Covenant with him and with those we meet on our journey.

Let us, too, ask the Holy Spirit for the strength to be unafraid when faced with those who order us to be quiet, who slander us and even make attempts against our lives. Let us ask him to strengthen us interiorly, to be certain of the loving and comforting presence of the Lord at our side.

— CHAPTER VIII —

**The Art of Discernment
Proposed by the Wise Man, Gamaliel**

*St Peter's Square
Wednesday, 18 September 2019*

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Let us continue the catechesis on the Acts of the Apostles. To the Jews' prohibition against teaching in the name of Christ, Peter and the Apostles bravely respond that they cannot obey those who wish to impede the Gospel's journey in the world.

The Twelve thus demonstrate their possession of that "obedience of faith" that they will then bring about in all men (cf. Rom 1:5). Beginning at Pentecost, indeed, they are no longer men "alone". They experience that special synergy that makes them decentralize themselves and enables them to say: "we and the Holy Spirit" (cf. Acts 5:32) or "to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). They feel they cannot say "I" alone; they are men decentralized from themselves.

Strengthened by this alliance, the Apostles do not allow anyone to intimidate them. They have tremendous courage! Let us remember that these men were cowards: everyone ran away; they fled when Jesus was arrested. But, from cowards they became so courageous. Why? Because the

Holy Spirit was with them. The same thing happens to us: if we have the Holy Spirit within, we have the courage to go forth, the courage to win many battles, not by ourselves but by the Spirit who is with us. They do not regress in their march as intrepid witnesses to the Risen Jesus, like the martyrs of all times, including ours. Martyrs give their lives; they do not hide being Christian. Let us consider, a few years ago — today too there are so many — but let us consider four years ago, those Coptic Orthodox Christians, true workers, on the beach in Libya: all their throats were cut. But the last word they said was “Jesus, Jesus”. They did not sell out their faith, because the Holy Spirit was with them. These are today’s martyrs! The Apostles are the “megaphones” of the Holy Spirit, sent by the Risen One to spread quickly and without reservation the Word that gives salvation.

And truly, this determination causes trepidation in the Jewish “religious system”, which feels threatened and responds with violence and death sentences. The persecution of Christians is always the same: people who do not want Christianity feel threatened and thus they condemn Christians. But in the middle of the Sanhedrin, the voice of a different Pharisee is heard, one who chooses to curb the reaction of his people: his name was Gamaliel, a prudent man, “a teacher of the law, held in honour by all the people”. At his school, Saint Paul had learned to observe “the law of our fathers” (Acts

22:3). Gamaliel takes the floor and shows his brothers how to practise *the art of discernment* when faced with situations that go beyond the usual context.

Referring to several people who passed themselves off as the Messiah, he demonstrates that every human plan may enjoy a consensus at first and then fail, whereas all that comes from on High and bears God's "signature" is destined to endure. Human designs always fail. They have a season, like us. Think of the many political projects, and how they change from one side to the other in all countries. Think of the great empires; think of the dictatorships of the last century. They felt very powerful; they thought they could dominate the world. And then they all collapsed. Think today too, of today's empires. They will collapse if God is not with them because the power that men have within them is not long-lasting. Only God's power endures. Let us think of the history of Christians, even the history of the Church with the many sins, the many scandals, with many bad things, throughout these two millennia. And why did she not fall? Because God is there. We are sinners and often we too cause scandal. But God is with us. And God saves us first, and then them, but the Lord always saves. The strength is "God with us". Referring to some characters who had passed themselves off as the Messiah, Gamaliel demonstrates that every human project can enjoy

consensus at first and then fail. Therefore, Gamaliel concludes that if the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth believed in an imposter, they were destined to disappear into nothing; if instead they follow one who comes from God, it is better to quit fighting them; and he admonishes: “You might even be found opposing God!” (Acts 5:39). He teaches us to make this discernment.

They are calm and farsighted words that allow us to view the Christian advent in a new light, and they offer parameters that “echo the Gospel” because they invite us to recognize the tree by its fruits (cf. Mt 7:16). They touch our hearts and achieve the desired effect: the other members of the Sanhedrin follow his advice and forego the intention of death, that is, to kill the Apostles.

Let us ask the Holy Spirit to act within us so that both personally and communally, we may achieve the *habitus* of discernment. Let us ask him to help us always be able to recognize the unity of salvation history through the signs of God’s passage in our time and on the faces of those who are near us so that we may learn that time and human faces are messengers of the Living God.

— CHAPTER IX —

Diakonia (Service) and Martyrdom

St Peter's Square

Wednesday, 25 September 2019

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

With the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, we shall continue to follow a journey: the journey of the Gospel in the world. With great realism, Saint Luke illustrates both the fruitfulness of this journey, and the onset of problems within the Christian community. From the very beginning there were always problems. How can we harmonize the differences that coexist within it without the occurrence of conflict and schisms?

The community not only welcomed the Hebrews, but also the Greeks, that is, people from the diaspora, non-Jews, with their own culture and sensitivities and with another religion. Today we call them “gentiles”. And they were welcomed. This shared presence brought with it a fragile and precarious balance: and before these difficulties, “weeds” begin to appear, and which is the worst weed that destroys a community? The weed of discontent, the weeds of gossip: the Greeks complain about the community’s lack of attention to their widows.

The Apostles begin a process of discernment which consists in recognizing all the difficulties

and trying to find solutions together. They find a way out by dividing the various tasks, for the peaceful growth of the entire ecclesial body, and in order to avoid neglecting either the “course” of the Gospel or caring for the poorest members.

The Apostles are ever more aware that their main vocation is to pray and preach the Word of God: to pray and proclaim the Gospel: and they resolve the issue by establishing a nucleus of “seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom (Acts 6:3), who, after receiving the laying on of hands, will “serve tables”. It refers to the deacons who were created for this, for service. In the Church a deacon is not a deputy priest, but something else. He is not for the altar but for service. He is the custodian of service in the Church. When a deacon is too fond of going to the altar, he is making a mistake. This is not his path. This harmony between service to the Word and service to charity represents the leaven that makes the ecclesial body grow.

So the Apostles create the seven deacons and among the seven “deacons”, Stephen and Philip in particular stand out. Stephen evangelizes with strength and *parresia*, but his word meets the most obstinate resistance. Not finding any other way to stop him, what do his opponents do? They choose the most paltry solution to annihilate a human being: that is, slander or false witness. And we know that slander always kills.

This “diabolical cancer” that arises from the desire to destroy the reputation of a person, also attacks the ecclesial body and seriously damages it, when as a result of malicious interests or to cover up one’s own inadequacies, people unite to denigrate someone.

Brought to the Sanhedrin and accused by false witnesses — they had done the same to Jesus and they will do the same to all the martyrs through false testimonies and slander — Stephen proclaims a re-reading of the sacred story centred on Christ, to defend himself. And the Paschal mystery of Jesus dead and Risen is the key to the entire story of the Covenant. Imbued with this overabundance of the Divine Gift, Stephen courageously denounces the hypocrisy with which the prophets and Christ himself had been treated. And he reminds them of the story, saying: “Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered” (Acts 7:52). He does not mince his words, but rather speaks with clarity; he speaks the truth.

This stirs a violent reaction in the audience and Stephen is condemned to death, condemned to be stoned. However, he manifests the true “fabric” of a disciple of Christ. He does not seek shortcuts, he does not appeal to important people who could save him, but rather places his life in

the hands of the Lord, and Stephen's prayer is very beautiful at that moment: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59) — and he dies as a son of God, forgiving: "Lord do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60).

These words of Stephen teach us that it is not beautiful speeches that reveal our identity as children of God, but that only by surrendering one's life into the hands of the Father and forgiving those who offend us can the quality of our faith be shown.

There are more martyrs today than there were at the beginning of the life of the Church, and martyrs are everywhere. Today the Church is rich in martyrs, it is steeped in their blood: "The blood of Christians is seed" (Tertullian, *Apology*, 50:13) and ensures the growth and fruitfulness of the People of God. Martyrs are not just "saintly", but rather men and women in flesh and blood who — as Revelation says — "have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (7:14). They are the true victors.

Let us also ask the Lord today that by looking to the martyrs of yesterday and today, we can learn to live a full life, welcoming the martyrdom of everyday faithfulness to the Gospel and conforming to Christ.

— CHAPTER X —

**Philip and the New Phase
of the Gospel's Journey**

*St Peter's Square
Wednesday, 2 October 2019*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

After the martyrdom of Stephen, the “journey” of the Word of God seems to come to a standstill, due to the rise of “a great persecution against the Church in Jerusalem” (cf. Acts 8:1). After this the Apostles remain in Jerusalem, while many Christians are scattered across other areas of Judea and in Samaria. In the Book of the Acts, persecution appears as the permanent state of the disciples’ lives, in accordance with what Jesus said: “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you” (Jn 15:20). But persecution, rather than extinguishing the fire of evangelization, fuels it even more.

We have heard what the deacon Philip did. He begins to evangelize the cities of Samaria, and the signs of liberation and healing that accompany the proclamation of the Word are numerous. At this point the Holy Spirit enters a new phase of the Gospel’s journey: he spurs Philip to approach a foreigner whose heart is open to God. Philip rises and goes with enthusiasm, and along a deserted and dangerous road, he meets a high-level official of the queen of

Ethiopia, an administrator of her treasure. After being in Jerusalem for worship, this man, a eunuch, is returning to his country. He is a proselyte Jew from Ethiopia. He is seated in a carriage, reading the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah, in particular the fourth verse of the “servant of the Lord”.

Philip approaches the carriage and asks him: “Do you understand what you are reading?” (Acts 8:30). The Ethiopian responds: “How can I, unless some one guides me?” (8:31). This powerful man recognizes that he needs to be guided in order to understand the Word of God. He was the great banker, the finance minister. He had all the power of money but he knew that without the explanation, he could not understand; he was humble.

This dialogue between Philip and the Ethiopian leads us to reflect on the fact that reading Scripture is not enough; we need to understand the meaning, to find the “core” by going beyond the “peel”, tapping into the Spirit who vivifies the letter. As Pope Benedict said at the opening of the Synod on the Word of God, “exegesis, the true reading of Holy Scripture, is not only a literary phenomenon.... It is the movement of my existence” (Address at the Opening of the 12th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 6 October 2008). To enter the Word of God is to be open to step outside one’s own boundaries in order to

encounter and conform to Christ who is the living Word of the Father.

Who then is the protagonist of what the Ethiopian was reading? Philip offers his interlocutor an interpretative key: that meek, suffering servant — who does not react to evil with evil, and who, despite being seen as a failure, unproductive and is ultimately done away with, frees the people from iniquity and bears fruit for God — is that very Christ whom Philip and the entire Church proclaim! The one who redeemed us all through the Paschal Mystery. At last the Ethiopian recognizes Christ, requests Baptism and professes his faith in the Lord Jesus. This narrative is beautiful, but who stirred Philip to go to the desert to encounter this man? Who spurred Philip to approach the carriage? It is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the protagonist of evangelization. “Father I am going to evangelize” — “Yes, what do you do?” — “Oh, I proclaim the Gospel and I say who Jesus is; I try to convince people that Jesus is God”. My dear, this is not evangelization. If there is no Holy Spirit there is no evangelization. This may be proselytism, advertising.... But evangelization is allowing yourself to be guided by the Holy Spirit, letting him lead you to proclamation, to proclamation with witness, even with martyrdom, even with words.

After introducing the Ethiopian to the Risen One — the Ethiopian encounters the Risen Jesus because he understands that prophesy — Philip disappears. The Spirit takes him and sends him to do something else. I have said that the protagonist of evangelization is the Holy Spirit; and what is the sign that you are a Christian woman or man, that you are an evangelizer? Joy. Martyrdom too. And, rejoicing, Philip went on his way to preach the Gospel.

May the Holy Spirit spur baptized men and women to proclaim the Gospel so as to attract others, not to themselves but to Christ; that they know how to make room for the action of God; that they know how to make others free and responsible before the Lord.

— CHAPTER XI —

Saul, from Persecutor to Evangelizer

Wednesday, 9 October 2019

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Beginning with the narrative of the stoning of Stephen, a figure emerges which, along with that of Peter, is the most present and significant in the Acts of the Apostles: that of “a young man named Saul” (Acts 7:58). At first, he is described as one who approves of Stephen’s death and wants to “lay waste the Church” (cf. Acts 8:3); but he will later become God’s chosen instrument to proclaim the Gospel to the peoples (cf. Acts 9:15; 22:21; 26:17).

With the high priest’s endorsement, Saul hunts down Christians and captures them. Those of you who come from populations who are persecuted by dictatorships, you well understand what it means to hunt people down and capture them. That is what Saul did. And he does this believing he is serving the Law of the Lord. Luke says that Saul ‘was breathing’ “threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1): there is a breath in him which reeks of death, not life.

The young Saul is portrayed as uncompromising; that is, one who manifests intolerance

towards those who think differently from himself. He makes his own political and religious identity absolute and he reduces the other to a potential enemy to be fought. An ideologue. In Saul, religion had been transformed into ideology: religious ideology, social ideology, political ideology. Only after being transformed by Christ will he teach that the true battle is not “against flesh and blood, but against ... the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness” (Eph 6:12). He will teach that one must not fight against people but rather the evil that inspires their actions.

Saul’s state of anger — because Saul is angry — and hostility invites each of us to question ourselves: How do I live my life of faith? Do I seek to *encounter* others or am I *counter to* others? Do I belong to the universal Church (the good, the bad, everyone) or do I have a selective ideology? Do I adore God or do I adore dogmatic formulations? How is my religious life? Does the faith in God that I profess make me friendly or hostile towards those who are different from me?

Luke recounts that, while Saul is wholly intent on eradicating the Christian community, the Lord is on his trail in order to touch his heart and convert him to Himself. It is the Lord’s way: he touches hearts. The Risen One takes the initiative and manifests himself to Saul on the way to Damascus, an event that is narrated three times

in the Book of Acts (cf. Acts 9:3-19; 22:3-21; 26:4-23). Through the pairing of “light” and “voice”, typical of theophanies, the Risen One appears to Saul and asks him to account for his fratricidal wrath: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (cf. Acts 9:4). Here the Risen One manifests that he is one with those who believe in him: To strike a member of the Church is to strike Christ himself! Even those who are ideologues because they want the “purity” — in quotation marks — of the Church, strike Christ.

Jesus’ voice says to Saul: “rise and enter the city and you will be told what you are to do” (Acts 9:6). Once on his feet, however, Saul can no longer see anything. He has become blind, and from a strong, authoritative and independent man, he becomes weak, needy and dependent upon others because he cannot see. Christ’s light has dazzled him and rendered him blind: “thus what was his inner reality is also outwardly apparent, his blindness to the truth, to the light that is Christ” (Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, 3 September 2008).

From this “one to one” between Saul and the Risen One, a transformation begins which reveals Saul’s “personal Paschal journey”, his passage from death to life: what was once glory becomes “refuse” to reject, in order to gain the true worth which is Christ and life in him (cf. Phil 3:7-8).

Paul receives Baptism. Thus for Saul, as for each of us, Baptism marks the beginning of a new life, and it is accompanied by a new gaze upon God, upon himself and upon others, who from enemies, have now become brothers and sisters in Christ.

Let us ask the Father that, as with Saul, he will allow us too to experience the impact of his love which alone can make a heart of flesh from a heart of stone (cf. Ez 11:19), able to welcome “the same sentiment of Jesus Christ within us” (cf. Phil 2:5).

— CHAPTER XII —

**Peter and the Outpouring
of the Spirit upon the Pagans**

Wednesday, 16 October 2019

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

*The Gospel's journey through the world, which Saint Luke recounts in the Acts of the Apostles, is accompanied by the supreme creativity of God which is manifested in a surprising way. God wants his children to overcome all particularism in order to open themselves up to the universality of salvation. This is the aim: to overcome particularism in order to be open to the universality of salvation, because God wants to save everyone. Those who are reborn by water and by the Holy Spirit — the baptized — are called to go out of themselves and be open to others, to live the closeness, the way of living together, which transforms every interpersonal relationship into an experience of fraternity (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelií Gaudium*, n. 87).*

The witness to this process of “fraternization” that the Spirit wishes to initiate in history is Peter, the protagonist in the Acts of the Apostles, along with Paul. Peter experiences an event that marks a decisive turning point in his life. While he is praying, he receives a vision that acts as divine “provocation”, so as to bring about a change of mindset in him. He sees a great tablecloth that descends from on High, containing

various creatures: four-legged animals, reptiles and birds, and he hears a voice that invites him to eat of that flesh. He, as a good Jew, responds by claiming that he has never eaten anything unclean, as required by the Law of the Lord (cf. Lev 11). Then the voice reiterates forcefully: “What God has cleansed, you must not call common” (Acts 10:15).

With this event the Lord wants Peter to no longer value events and people according to the categories of clean and unclean, but that he learn to go further, to look at the person and at the intentions in his or her heart. What renders man unclean, in fact, comes not from outside but only from within, from the heart (cf. Mk 7:21). Jesus said it clearly.

After that vision, God invites Peter to go to the house of an uncircumcised Gentile, Cornelius, “a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, a devout man who feared God”, who gave alms liberally to the people and always prayed to God (cf. Acts 10:1-2), but was not a Jew.

In that Gentile’s home, Peter preaches Christ Crucified and Risen, and the forgiveness of sins to those who believe in Him. And as Peter speaks, the Holy Spirit pours out upon Cornelius and his household. And Peter baptizes them in the name of Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 10:48).

This extraordinary fact — it is the first time that this sort of thing happens — becomes common knowledge in Jerusalem, where the brethren, scandalized by Peter’s behaviour, criticize him bitterly (cf. Acts 11:1-3). Peter did something that went beyond what was customary, beyond the law, and this is why they criticize him. But after the encounter with Cornelius, Peter is more free of himself and in greater communion with God and with others, because he has seen the will of God in the action of the Holy Spirit. Thus he is able to understand that the election of Israel is not a reward for merit, but the sign of the freely given call to be a mediator of the divine blessing among the Gentiles.

Dear brothers and sisters, we learn from the Prince of the Apostles that an evangelizer cannot be an impediment to the creative work of God, who “desires all men to be saved” (1 Tim 2:4), but one who fosters the encounter of hearts with the Lord. And we, how do we behave towards our brothers and sisters, especially those who are not Christian? Are we an impediment to the encounter with God? Do we obstruct their encounter with the Father or do we facilitate it?

Today let us ask for the grace to allow ourselves to be astonished by God’s surprises, not to obstruct his creativity, but to recognize and foster the ever new ways through which the Risen One pours out his Spirit upon the world and attracts hearts by making them come to know him as “Lord of all” (Acts 10:36). Thank you.

— CHAPTER XIII —

**The Mission of Paul and Barnabas
and the Council of Jerusalem**

Wednesday, 23 October 2019

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles recounts that after that transformative encounter with Jesus, Saint Paul is welcomed by the Church of Jerusalem thanks to the mediation of Barnabas, and he begins to proclaim Christ. However, due to the hostility of some, he is forced to move on to Tarsus, his native city, where Barnabas joins him in order to engage him in the long *journey of the Word of God*. We can say that the Book of the Acts of the Apostles on which we are commenting in these catecheses is the Book of the long journey of the Word of God: the Word of God is to be proclaimed, and to be proclaimed everywhere. This journey begins in the wake of severe persecution (cf. Acts 11:19); but instead of provoking a setback for evangelization, it becomes an opportunity to expand the field on which to sow the good seed of the Word. The Christians do not feel afraid. They must flee, but they flee with the Word and they spread the Word somewhat everywhere.

Paul and Barnabas arrive first in Antioch, Syria, where they stay for a whole year to teach and

help the community to put down roots (cf. Acts 11:26). They proclaimed to the Hebrew community, to the Jews. Antioch thus becomes the centre of missionary impulse, thanks to the preaching of the two evangelizers — Paul and Barnabas — which impresses the hearts of believers who, here in Antioch, are called “Christians” for the first time (cf. Acts 11:26).

The nature of the Church appears from the Book of the Acts; she is not a fortress but a tent able to enlarge her space (cf. Is 54:2) and give access to all. Either the Church “goes forth” or she is not a Church; either she is on a journey always widening her space so that everyone can enter, or she is not a Church. A “Church whose doors are open” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 46), always with open doors. When I see a small church here, in this city, or when I would see one in the other diocese that I come from, with closed doors, this is a bad sign. Churches should always have their doors open because this is the sign of what a church is: always open. The Church is always “called to be the house of the Father... so that if someone, moved by the Spirit, comes there looking for God, he or she will not find a closed door” (ibid., 47).

But this novelty of *doors open* to whom? To the *Gentiles*, because the Apostles were preaching to the Jews, but the Gentiles came to knock at the Church’s doors; and this novelty of doors

open to the Gentiles triggers a very lively controversy. Several Jews affirm the need to become Jewish through circumcision in order to be saved, and then to receive Baptism. They say: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1), that is, you cannot receive Baptism afterwards. First the Jewish rite and then Baptism: this was their position. And to resolve the issue, Paul and Barnabas seek the advice of the Apostles and of the elders of Jerusalem, and what takes place is what is held to be the First Council in the history of the Church, *the Council or Assembly of Jerusalem*, to which Paul refers in the Letter to the Galatians (2:1-10).

A very delicate theological, spiritual and disciplinary issue is addressed, that is, *the relationship between faith in Christ and observance of the Law of Moses*. During the Assembly, the discourses of Peter and James — “pillars” of the Mother Church — are decisive (cf. Acts 15:7-21; Gal 2:9). They exhort not imposing circumcision on the Gentiles but, instead, asking them only to reject idolatry and all its expressions. From the discussion emerges the common path, and this decision was ratified with the so-called *Apostolic Letter* sent to Antioch.

The Assembly of Jerusalem sheds important light on the way to face differences and to seek the “truth in love” (Eph 4:15). It reminds us that

the ecclesial method for resolving conflict is based on dialogue made of careful and patient listening and on discernment undertaken in the light of the Spirit. Indeed, it is the Spirit who helps to overcome closure and tension, and works within hearts so that they may achieve unity in truth and goodness. This text helps us understand synodality. It is interesting how they write the Letter: the Apostles begin by saying: “The Holy spirit and we *believe* that...”. The presence of the Holy Spirit is proper to synodality, otherwise it is not synodality. It is the parlour, parliament, something else....

Let us ask the Lord to strengthen in all Christians, particularly in presbyters, the desire and the responsibility of communion. May he help us to experience dialogue, listening and encounter with our brothers and sisters in faith and with those afar, in order to savour and manifest the fruitfulness of the Church which is called to be, in every age, the “joyous mother” of many children (cf. Ps 113[112]:9).

— CHAPTER XIV —

The Christian Faith Arrives in Europe

*St Peter's Square
Wednesday, 30 October 2019*

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Reading the Acts of the Apostles, one can see how the Holy Spirit is the protagonist of the Church's mission. It is he who guides the journey of the evangelizers by showing them the path to follow.

We can see this clearly in the moment in which the Apostle Paul, having reached Troas, has a vision. A Macedonian beseeches him: "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9). The people of North Macedonia are proud of this; they are very proud of having called Paul for it was Paul who proclaimed Jesus Christ. I remember well those beautiful people who welcomed me with so much warmth. May they preserve this faith which Paul preached to them! The Apostle does not hesitate and leaves for Macedonia, certain that it is precisely God who is sending him, and he arrives in Philippi, a "Roman colony" (Acts 16:12) on the *Via Egnatia*, to preach the Gospel. Paul stops there for some days. Three events characterize his stay in Philippi in three days; three important events. 1) the evangelization and baptism of Lydia and her family; 2) the

arrest he endures, along with Silas, after exorcising a slave exploited by her owners; 3) the conversion and baptism of his jailer and his family. Let us look at these three episodes in Paul's life.

The power of the Gospel is mostly addressed to the women of Philippi, in particular to Lydia, a merchant of purple goods from the city of Thyatira, a believer in God whose heart the Lord opens in order "to give heed to what was said by Paul" (Acts 16:14). Indeed Lydia welcomes Christ, receives baptism together with her family and welcomes *those who are of Christ*, hosting Paul and Silas in her home. We have here the testimony of Christianity's arrival in Europe: the beginning of a process of inculturation which continues still today. It entered via Macedonia.

After the warmth experienced in Lydia's home, Paul and Silas find themselves having to deal with the harshness of prison: they go from the comfort of this conversion of Lydia and her family, to the desolation of prison where they have been thrown for having freed in the name of Jesus, a "slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain" with her position as soothsayer (Acts 16:16). Her owners earned well and this wretched slave did what fortune tellers do: she would guess your future, she would read your palms — as the song says: "*prendi questa mano zingara*" (take this hand,

gypsy) — and people paid her for this. Today too, dear brothers and sisters, there are people who pay for this. I remember in my own diocese, in a very large park, there were more than 60 small tables where men and women fortune tellers sat reading palms and the people believed in these things! And they paid. And this also happened in Saint Paul's days. In retaliation, her owners reported Paul and they brought the Apostles before the magistrates with the charge of public disorder.

But what happens? Paul is in prison and during his imprisonment a surprising fact occurs. He is desolated but instead of complaining, Paul and Silas begin to sing hymns praising God and this praise unleashes a power that frees them: during the prayer, an earthquake shakes the foundations of the prison, the doors open and everyone's fetters fall off (cf. Acts 16:25-26). Just like the prayer of Pentecost, even the one said in prison brings about extraordinary effects.

Believing that the prisoners had escaped, the jailer was on the verge of committing suicide because jailers paid with their lives if a prisoner escaped. But Paul cries out: "we are all here" (Acts 16:28). He then asks: "what must I do to be saved?" (v. 30). The answer is: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (v. 31). At this point a change occurs: in the middle of the night, the jailer listens to the Word of the Lord with his family, he

welcomes the Apostles, washes their wounds — because they had been beaten — and together with his family, he receives Baptism; then “he rejoiced with all his household that he had believed in God” (v. 34). He prepares a meal and invites Paul and Silas to stay with them: the moment of comfort! In the middle of this anonymous jailer’s night, the light of Christ shines and defeats the darkness: the chains of the heart fall off and a previously unknown joy blossoms within him and his relatives. Thus, the Holy Spirit is on mission: from the start, from Pentecost onwards he is the protagonist of the mission. And he carries us forward. We must be faithful to the vocation to which the Spirit moves us. In order to bring the Gospel.

Today, let us too ask the Holy Spirit for an open heart, like Lydia’s, receptive to God and welcoming towards our brothers and sisters and a bold faith, like that of Paul and Silas, and also an open heart like that of the jailer who allows himself to be touched by the Holy Spirit.

— CHAPTER XV —

**The Areopagus and Paul,
a Builder of Bridges**

St Peter's Square

Wednesday, 6 November 2019

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good Morning!

Let us continue our “journey” with the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. After the trials experienced in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea, Paul arrived in Athens, the very heart of Greece (cf. Acts 17:15). This city that lived in the shadow of its ancient glory despite its political decline, still held the primacy of culture. Here the Apostle’s “spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols” (Acts 17:16). However rather than avoid this “collision” with paganism it spurs him to create a bridge to converse with that culture.

Paul chooses to acquaint himself with the city and he thus began to visit its most important sites and people. He goes to the synagogue, the symbol of the life of the faith; he goes to the square, the symbol of city life; and he goes to the Areopagus, the symbol of political and cultural life. He meets Jews, philosophers, Epicureans, Stoics and many others. He meets all the people. He does not withdraw. He goes to speak to all the people. In this way, Paul observes the culture

and he observes the environment of Athens “with a contemplative gaze” that discovers “God dwelling in their homes, in their streets and squares” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 71). Paul does not look at the city of Athens and the pagan world with hostility, but rather with the eyes of faith. And this makes us question ourselves about the way we look at our cities: do we observe them with indifference? With disdain? Or with a faith that recognizes God’s children in the midst of anonymous crowds.

Paul chooses the gaze that spurs him to create an opening between the Gospel and the pagan world. In the heart of one of the most celebrated institutions in the ancient world, the Areopagus, he achieves an extraordinary example of inculturation of the message of faith: he proclaims Jesus Christ to the idol worshippers, and he does not do so by attacking them, but by making himself “a Pope, a builder of bridges” (*Homily at Sanctae Marthae*, 8 May 2013).

Paul is inspired by the altar of the city dedicated to “an unknown god” (Acts 17:23) — there was an altar with the inscription “to an unknown god”; no image, nothing, only that inscription. Starting from their “worship” of an unknown god, so as to empathize with his listeners, he proclaims that God “dwells among them” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 71) and “does not hide himself from those who seek him with a sincere heart, even

though they do so tentatively” (ibid). It is precisely this presence that Paul tries to unveil: “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23).

In order to reveal the identity of the god that the Athenians adore, the Apostle begins from Creation, that is from biblical faith in the God of revelation, in order to reach salvation and judgment, that is, the true Christian message. He shows the disproportion between the greatness of the Creator and the temples built by man, and explains that the Creator always makes himself sought, in such a way that each one can find him. In this way, according to a beautiful expression Pope Benedict XVI used, Paul “is proclaiming him whom men do not know and yet do know — the unknown-known” (Benedict XVI, Meeting with representatives from the world of culture at the Collège des Bernardins, Paris, 12 September 2008). He then invites everyone to go beyond the “times of ignorance” and to choose conversion in view of the imminent judgment. Paul thus arrives at *kerigma* and alludes to Christ without naming him, defining him as the “man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31).

And herein lies the problem. Paul’s word, which had kept the speakers in suspense — because it was an interesting discovery —, meets a stumbling block: the death and Resurrection of Christ appears to be “folly” (1 Cor 1:23) and raises

scorn and derision. Paul then distances himself: his attempt appears to have failed; instead some accept his word and open themselves to the faith. Among them is a man, Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, and a woman, Damaris. The Gospel takes root even in Athens, and can then proceed with two voices: that of men and that of women!

Today, let us ask the Holy Spirit to teach us to build bridges through culture, with those who do not believe and those who have a different belief from ours. Always building bridges, always with outstretched hand, no aggression. Let us ask him for the ability to inculturate the message of faith with sensitivity, to have a contemplative gaze towards those who do not know Christ, to be moved by love that warms even the hardest of hearts.

— CHAPTER XVI —

A Couple at the Service of the Gospel

*St Peter's Square
Wednesday, 13 November 2019*

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good Morning!

This audience is divided into two groups: the sick are in the Paul VI Hall — I was with them. I greeted and blessed them. They are roughly 250 in number. They will be more comfortable there because of the rain — and we are here. But they can see us on the maxi screen. Let us greet both groups with a round of applause.

The Acts of the Apostles recounts that as a tireless evangelizer, after his stay in Athens, Paul continues the Gospel's journey throughout the world. The next leg of his missionary journey is Corinth, the capital city of the Roman province of Achaea, a commercial and cosmopolitan city thanks to its two important ports.

As we read in Chapter 18 of the Acts, Paul is welcomed by a married couple, Aquila and Priscilla (or Prisca), who was forced to move from Rome to Corinth after Emperor Claudius had ordered the expulsion of all Jews (cf. Acts 18:2). I would like to pause here. Jewish people have suffered greatly throughout history. They

were exiled, persecuted ... And in the last century, we saw very great brutality perpetrated against Jewish people and we were all certain that this had ended. But scattered here and there, today the habit of persecuting Jews is beginning to reappear. Brothers and sisters, this is neither human nor Christian. The Jews are our brothers! And they should not be persecuted. Understood? These spouses show that they have a heart that is filled with faith in God and is generous to others, capable of making room for those who, like them, experience the condition of being a foreigner. Their sensitivity makes them altruistic in order to practice the Christian art of hospitality (cf. Rom 12:13; Heb 13:2) and open the doors of their home to welcome the Apostle Paul. They thus welcome not only the evangelizer, but also the Good News that he brings with him: the Gospel of Christ which is “the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith” (Rom 1:16). And from that moment their home is permeated by the scent of the “living” Word (Heb 4:12) that enlivens hearts.

Aquila and Priscilla also share the same trade as Paul, that is, tent making. Indeed, Paul greatly admired manual labour and considered it to be favourable to bearing Christian witness (1 Cor 4:12) as well as a good way to support oneself without being a burden on others or on the community (cf. 1 Thess 2:9; 2 Thess 3:8).

Aquila and Priscilla’s home opens its doors not only to the Apostle but also to the brothers and

sisters in Christ. Indeed, Paul can speak of “a community that gathers in their house” (cf. 1 Cor 16:19), which becomes a “house of the Church”, a “*domus ecclesiae*”, a place in which to listen to the Word of God and celebrate the Eucharist. Even today, in some countries where there is no religious freedom and Christians have no freedom, Christians still meet in a house, a little hidden, to pray and celebrate the Eucharist. Today too there are these homes, these families that become a temple for the Eucharist.

After staying a year and a half in Corinth, Paul leaves that city with Aquila and Priscilla who remain at Ephesus. There too, their house becomes a place of catecheses (cf. Acts 18:26). Eventually the spouses will return to Rome and become the recipients of splendid praise that the Apostle describes in his Letter to the Romans. Listen: “Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Jesus Christ, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but also all the Churches of the Gentiles give thanks” (Rom 16:4). How many families risk their lives in times of persecution, in order to keep the persecuted hidden! This is the first example: a family welcomes even in bad times.

Among Paul’s many coworkers, Aquila and Priscilla emerge “as models of conjugal life responsibly committed to the service of the entire Christian community” and they remind us that Christianity has come to us, thanks to the faith

and the commitment to evangelization of many lay people like them. Indeed, in order “to take root in people’s land and develop actively, the commitment of these families” was necessary (*ibid*). Just think that from the very beginning, Christianity was preached by lay people. You lay people are also responsible for your Baptism, to carry the faith forward. It was the commitment of many families, of these spouses, of these Christian communities, of the lay faithful, “in order to offer the ‘humus’ for the growth of the faith” (*ibid*). This sentence of Benedict XVI is beautiful: *lay people offer the humus for the growth of the faith* (Benedict XVI General Audience, 7 February 2007).

Let us ask the Father who chose to make the spouses his true living sculptures — (cf. *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 11) — I think there are newlyweds here: listen to your vocation, you must be the true living sculpture — to spread his Spirit to all the Christian couples so that by the example of Aquila and Priscilla, they may open the doors of their hearts to Christ and to our brothers and sisters, and transform their homes into domestic churches. Fine words: a home is a domestic church in which to experience communion and offer the example of worship of a life lived in faith, hope and charity. We must pray to these two Saints, Aquila and Prisca, so that they may teach our families to be like them: a domestic church where there is humus so that faith may grow.

— CHAPTER XVII —

Paul's Ministry in Ephesus

Dear Brothers and sisters, Good Morning!

The Gospel's journey throughout the world continues tirelessly in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, and passes through the city of Ephesus, manifesting its salvific scope. Thanks to Paul, some 12 men are baptized in the name of Jesus and experience receiving the warmth of the Holy Spirit which regenerates them (cf. Acts 19:1-7). Several miracles then take place through the Apostle: the sick are healed and the possessed are freed. (cf. Acts 19:11). This happens because the disciple resembles his Teacher (cf. Lk 6:40) and he makes him present, communicating to his brothers and sisters that same new life he received from him. Indeed, every evangelizer is conscious of being, in his person and through his actions, "a mission on this earth", and of being branded by fire, by this mission of "bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing" (Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 273). Paul is conscious of this branding and he thus spares no effort in his evangelization work.

God's power, which is unleashed in Ephesus, unmasks those who want to use Jesus' name to perform exorcisms without having the spiritual

authority to do so (cf. Acts 19:13-17), and reveals the weakness of magical arts, which are abandoned by a large number of people who choose Christ, thereby abandoning the magical arts (cf. Acts 19:18-19). A true upheaval for a city like Ephesus, a city that was known for its practice of magic! Luke thus highlights the incompatibility between faith in Christ and magic. If one chooses Christ, one cannot turn to a sorcerer: faith is the trusting abandon into the reliable hands of a God who makes himself known, not through magical practices, but through revelation and with freely given love. Perhaps some of you might say to me: “Ah yes, magic is an ancient thing: this does not occur today with Christian civilization”. But be careful! I ask you: how many of you go to have your tarot cards read, how many of you go to have your palms read by palm readers, or have your fortune read? Today too in large cities, practicing Christians do these things. And to the question: Why do you go to the sorcerer, to the fortune teller, to these people, if you are Christian?, they reply: “I believe in Jesus Christ but I go to them too out of superstition”. Please: magic is not Christian! These things that are done to predict the future or to guess many things or to change life situations, are not Christian. The grace of Christ brings you everything: pray and entrust yourself to the Lord.

The spread of the Gospel at Ephesus damages the trade of silversmiths — yet another problem

—, who made statues of the goddess Artemis, making a true and proper business out of a religious practice. I ask you to think about this. As they see their trade, which earned a great deal of money, dwindle, the silversmiths organize an uprising against Paul, and the Christians are accused of causing problems to that category of artisans, to the shrine of Artemis and to the worship of this goddess (cf. Acts 19:23-28). The people are in uproar, but the town clerk is able to calm down the crowds, inviting the artisans to use legal avenues and exonerate Paul and the Christians from the accusations of sacrilege and blasphemy (cf. Acts 19:37).

Paul then leaves Ephesus headed for Jerusalem and arrives in Miletus (cf. Acts 20: 1-16). Here he sends for the elders of the Church of Ephesus — the presbyter, that is the priests — in order to make a transfer of “pastoral” deliveries (cf. Acts 20:17-35). These are the last stages of Paul’s Apostolic ministry and Luke presents his farewell speech to us, a sort of spiritual testament which the Apostle addresses to those who, following his departure, will have to lead the community of Ephesus. And this is one of the most beautiful pages of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles”. I advise you to take the new Testament today, the Bible, chapter XX, and to read this farewell of Paul to the presbyters of Ephesus, and he does it in Miletus. It is a way to understand how the Apostle takes his leave and also how presbyters today should take their

leave as well as how we Christians should take our leave. It is a beautiful page.

In the autobiographical part, with a retrospective glance to his mission in Asia Minor, Paul revisits the past of his complete self-investment, his humble service, the trials that were inflicted on him by the Hebrews, how he never spared himself in order to bring faith to others. Moreover, he foresees the new time which awaits him: a future marked by the trusting abandon to the Holy Spirit that leads him, like his Master and Lord in Jerusalem; and marked by the trials that still await him, in order to bring to fulfillment the Word's journey throughout the world.

In the exhortation part, Paul encourages the leaders of the community, whom he knows he will see for the last time. And what does he say to them? "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock". This is the task of the shepherd: to keep watch, to keep watch over himself and over his flock. The shepherd must keep watch, the parish priest must keep watch, keep watch, the presbyters must keep watch, the Bishops, the Pope must keep watch. To keep watch in order to protect the flock and also to keep watch over oneself, examining one's conscience and seeing how this duty of keeping watch is carried out. "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the Church of the Lord which he obtained with his own blood" (Acts 20:28), Saint Paul

says. *Bishops* are asked to have the greatest closeness to the flock, redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, and the readiness to defend it from “wolves” (v.29). Bishops have to be very close to the people so as to protect them, to defend them, not be detached from the people who threaten the sound doctrine and ecclesial communion. After entrusting the leaders of Ephesus with this task, Paul puts them in the hands of God and entrusts them to the “word of his grace” (v. 32), leaven of all growth and path of sanctity in the Church, inviting them to work with their own hands, like him, so as not to be a burden on others, to rescue the weakest and to experience that it “is more blessed to give than to receive” (v. 35).

Dear brothers and sisters, let us ask the Lord to renew in us our love for the Church and for the deposit of faith that she safeguards, and to make us all mutually responsible in protecting the flock, supporting the pastors in prayer so that they may manifest the firmness and tenderness of the Divine Pastor.

— CHAPTER XVIII —

Paul: Prisoner before Agrippa

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 11 December 2019*

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good Morning!

In the Reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the Gospel’s journey throughout the world continues and Saint Paul’s witness becomes increasingly marked by the seal of suffering. However, this is something that grows over time in Paul’s life. Paul is not only an evangelizer filled with ardour, the fearless missionary among the Gentiles who gives life to the new Christian communities, but also the suffering witness of the Risen One (cf. Acts 9: 15-16).

The Apostle’s arrival to Jerusalem, described in Chapter 21 of the Acts, unleashes fierce hatred against him. They reproach him: “But he was a persecutor! Do not trust him!”. As it was for Jesus, Jerusalem is a hostile city to him too. Having gone to the Temple, he is recognized, led outside to be lynched and saved *in extremis* by Roman soldiers. He is accused of teaching against the Law and the Temple, is arrested and thus begins his pilgrimage as a prisoner, first before the Sanhedrin, then before the Roman Governor in Caesarea, and finally before King Agrippa. Luke highlights the similarities between Paul and Jesus: both despised by their

adversaries, publicly accused and recognised as innocent by the empire's authorities. And thus, Paul becomes associated with the passion of his Teacher and his passion becomes a living Gospel.

I have come here from Saint Peter's Basilica where I had my first audience this morning with Ukrainian pilgrims, from a diocese in the Ukraine. How persecuted these people have been; how much they have suffered for the Gospel! But they did not negotiate their faith. They are an example. In the world today, in Europe, many Christians are persecuted and give their life for their own faith, or they are persecuted with white gloves, that is, left aside, marginalized ... Martyrdom is the air in the life of Christians and Christian communities. There will always be martyrs among us. This is the sign that we are on Jesus' path. It is the Lord's Blessing that there be among the People of God, someone who can offer this witness of martyrdom.

Paul is called to defend himself from the accusations and, in the end, in the presence of King Agrippa II, his *apologia* turns into an effective proclamation of faith (Acts 26: 1-23).

Paul then tells of his own conversion: the Risen Christ had made him a Christian and entrusted him with the mission among the people: "that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive

forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith” in Christ (v. 18). Paul had accepted this responsibility and had done nothing but reveal that the prophets and Moses had foretold what he was now announcing: that “Christ must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to the people and to the Gentiles” (v. 23). Paul’s passionate witness touches the heart of King Agrippa who is only missing the definitive step. And the king says: “In a short time you think to make me a Christian” (v. 28). Paul is declared innocent but he cannot be released because he has appealed to Caesar. Thus continues the unstoppable journey of the Word of God towards Rome. Paul, in chains, will end up here in Rome.

From this moment onwards, Paul’s figure becomes that of a *prisoner* whose chains mark his fidelity to the Gospel and the witness made to the Risen One.

The chains are certainly a humiliating trial for the Apostle who appears before the world as a “criminal” (2 Tim 2:9). However, his love for Christ is so strong that these chains too are read through the eyes of faith, a faith which for Paul “is not a theory, an opinion about God and the world” but rather “the impact of God’s love in his heart ... love for Jesus Christ” (Benedict XVI, Homily for the opening of the Pauline year, 28 June 2008).

Dear brothers and sisters, Paul teaches us to have perseverance during trials and the ability to read everything through the eyes of faith. Let us ask the Lord today for the Apostle's intercession, to revive our faith and help us to be faithful to the end, to our vocation as Christians, disciples of the Lord, missionaries.

— CHAPTER XIX —

**Paul: The Guardian of the Life of Others
and the Catalyst for Their Hope.**

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 8 January 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good Morning!

The final part of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles tells us that the Gospel *continues its journey not only on land but also by sea*, on a ship that brings the imprisoned Paul, from Caesarea to Rome (cf. Acts 27:1-28, 16), to the heart of the Empire so that the Word of the Risen One would be fulfilled: “you shall be my witnesses ... to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Read the Book of the Acts of the Apostles and you will see how, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Gospel will reach all people and become universal. Take it. Read it.

From the outset, the voyage meets with unfavourable conditions. The journey becomes dangerous. Paul advises not to continue navigating but the centurion takes no notice and puts his trust in the captain and in the owner of the ship. The voyage continues and a wind so impetuous is unleashed that the crew lose control of the ship and the ship sails adrift.

When death seems imminent and despair grips everyone, Paul intervenes and reassures his

companions by saying what we have just listened to: “this very night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul you must stand before Caesar; and lo, God has granted you all those who sail with you’” (Acts 27:23-24). Even in times of trial, Paul does not stop being the *guardian of the life of others and the catalyst for their hope*.

Thus Luke shows us that the design that leads Paul towards Rome not only saves the Apostle but also his fellow travellers and the shipwreck changes from being a disaster into a providential opportunity for the proclamation of the Gospel.

After the shipwreck comes the arrival at the island of Malta whose inhabitants offer a warm welcome. The Maltese are good, they are meek, they were already welcoming at that time. It is raining and cold and they light a fire to ensure the shipwrecked may have some warmth and relief. Here too, as a true disciple of Christ, Paul offers his service, feeding the fire with some branches. During this task he is bitten by a viper but he suffers no harm: upon seeing this the people say: “But he must be a great delinquent because he could save himself from shipwreck and then ends up being bitten by a viper”. They were waiting for him to fall dead but he suffered no harm and is even mistaken for a divinity rather than for a criminal. In reality that relief

comes from the Risen Christ who assists him according to the promise made to believers before ascending into heaven: “They will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them, they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover” (Mk 16:18). History states that there were no vipers in Malta from that time onwards. This is God’s blessing for this good people’s reception of the shipwrecked people.

Indeed Paul’s stay in Malta becomes a favourable opportunity to give “flesh” to the Word he proclaims and to thus exercise a ministry of compassion in healing the sick. And this is a law of the Gospel: when a believer experiences salvation they should not keep it for themselves but spread it around. “Goodness always tends to spread. Every authentic experience of truth and goodness seeks by its very nature to grow within us, and any person who has experienced a profound liberation becomes more sensitive to the needs of others” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 9). Christians who are “suffering” can certainly move themselves closer to those who suffer because they know what suffering is, and they can open their hearts and exercise solidarity to others.

Paul teaches us to live through tribulation by clinging to Christ, in order to gain the “conviction that God is able to act in every situation, even amid apparent setbacks” and the “certitude

that all those who entrust themselves to God in love will bear good fruit” (*ibid* n. 279). Love is always fruitful, love of God is always fruitful, and if you allow yourself to be taken by the Lord and receive the Lord’s gifts, this will allow you to give them to others. It always goes beyond love of God.

Today let us ask the Lord to help us experience every trial sustained by the energy of faith and to be attentive to history’s many shipwrecked who reach our shores exhausted, so that we too may know how to welcome them with that fraternal love that comes from the encounter with Jesus. This is what saves from the frost of indifference and inhumanity.

— CHAPTER XX —

Paul's Imprisonment in Rome and the Fruitfulness of the Announcement

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 15 January 2020*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today we conclude the catechesis on the Acts of the Apostles with Saint Paul's last missionary leg: that is Rome (cf. Acts 28:14).

Paul's voyage was one with the Gospel's journey, and is proof that when the course of men and women is lived in faith, they can become transit spaces for God's salvation, through the Word of faith which acts as a leaven that is capable of transforming situations and of opening ever new paths.

Paul's arrival in the heart of the Roman Empire marks the end of the account of the Acts of the Apostles which does not end with the martyrdom of Paul, but rather with the abundant sowing of the Word. The end of Luke's narrative, which is hinged on the voyage of the Gospel throughout the world, contains and summarizes all the dynamism of the unstoppable Word of God, Word that wants to "run" in order to communicate salvation to all.

In Rome, Paul first meets his brothers in Christ who welcomed him and give him courage (cf. Acts 28:15), and whose warm hospitality reveals how much his arrival was awaited and desired. He is then allowed to live on his own under *custodia militaris*, that is with a soldier who acts as his guard. He was under house arrest. Despite his condition as a prisoner, Paul is able to meet notable Jews to explain why he was forced to appeal to Caesar, and to speak to them of the Kingdom of God. He tries to convince them with regard to Jesus, starting from the Scriptures and showing them the continuity between the novelty of Christ and the “hope of Israel” (Acts 28:20). Paul identifies as profoundly Jewish and in the Gospel he preaches, that is, the Good News of Christ dead and Risen, he sees the fulfilment of the promises made to the chosen people.

This informal meeting which the Hebrews had agreed to, was followed by a more official one during which, for an entire day, Paul proclaims the Kingdom of God and tries to open his listeners to faith in Jesus “from the law of Moses and from the prophets” (Acts 28:23). Since not everyone is convinced, he denounces the hardened heart of the People of God, which is the reason for his guilt (cf. Is 6:9-10) and passionately celebrates the salvation of nations which instead show that they are receptive to God and capable of listening to the Word of the Gospel of life (cf. Acts 28:28).

At this point in the narrative, Luke concludes his work by showing us not Paul's death but the dynamism of his homily, of a Word that "is not fettered" (2 Tim 2:9). Paul does not have freedom of movement but he is free to speak because the Word is not fettered — it is a Word that is ready to be fully sown by the Apostle. Paul does this "quite openly and unhindered" (Acts 28:31), in a house where he welcomes those who want to receive the proclamation of the Kingdom of God and meet Christ. This home, open to all hearts that seek, is the image of the Church that, despite being persecuted, misunderstood and chained, never tires of welcoming each man and woman, with a maternal heart, in order to announce to them the love of the Father which became visible in Jesus.

Dear brothers and sisters, at the end of this itinerary which we have lived together by following the voyage of the Gospel throughout the world, may the Holy Spirit rekindle in each of us the call to be courageous and joyful evangelizers. Like Paul, may He make us capable of pervading our homes with the Gospel and of making them Cenacles of fraternity in which to welcome the living Christ who "comes to meet us in every man and at all times" (cf. Advent Preface).