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"The mystery of God's tenderness hidden behind his silence"

In his 18 May general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechesis on the elderly, speaking about the Book of Job.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

The biblical passage we have just heard concludes the Book of Job, a

universal literary classic. On our catechetical itinerary, we meet Job when he was an old man. We encounter him as a witness of a faith that does not accept a “caricature” of God, but protests loudly in the face of evil until God responds and reveals his face. And in the end, God responds, as always, in a surprising way – He shows Job His glory without crushing him, or better still, with sovereign tenderness, tenderly, just like God always does. The pages of this book need to be read well, without prejudices, without stereotypes, to understand the power of Job’s cry. It would be good for us to put ourselves in his school to overcome the temptation of moralism due to the exasperation and bitterness of the pain of having lost everything.

In this concluding passage of the book – we remember the story, don’t we? Job loses everything in his life,

he loses his wealth, he loses his family, he loses his son and he even loses his health, and that's where he is, plagued, in dialogue with three friends, then a fourth, who come to greet him: this is the story – and in this passage today, the concluding passage of the book, when God finally takes the floor (and this dialogue between Job and his friends is like the path leading to the moment in which God speaks his word), Job is praised because he understood *the mystery of God's tenderness hidden behind his silence*. God rebukes Job's friends who presumed they knew everything, to know about God and about suffering, and, having come to comfort Job, ended up judging him with their preconceived paradigms. God preserve us from this hypocritical and presumptuous religiosity! God preserve us from this moralistic religiosity and that religiosity of precepts that gives us a certain

presumption and leads you to phariseeism and hypocrisy.

This is how the Lord expresses himself in their regard. Thus says the Lord: “My wrath is kindled against you [...] for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has”, this is what the Lord says to Job’s friends. “My servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (42:7-8). God’s declaration surprises us because we have read pages on fire with Job’s protest which have left us dismayed. And yet, the Lord says Job spoke well, even when he was angry, and even angry at God, but he spoke well because he refused to accept that God was a “Persecutor”. God is something else. And what is that? Job was seeking that. And as a reward, God gives back to Job double of all

his possessions, after asking him to pray for those bad friends of his.

The turning point in the *conversation of faith* comes right at the height of Job's venting, where he says, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another" (19:25-27). This passage is really beautiful. It makes me think of the end of that brilliant oratorio of Handel, the Messiah, after the celebrative Hallelujah, the soprano slowly sings this passage: "I know that my Redeemer lives", peacefully. And so, after this painful and joyful experience of Job, the voice of the Lord is something else. "I know that my Redeemer lives" – it is truly a beautiful thing. We could interpret it like this: "My God, I know You are not a Persecutor. My God will come

and do me justice”. It is the simple faith in the resurrection of God, the simple faith in Jesus Christ, the simple faith that the Lord is always waiting for us and will come.

The parable of the Book of Job dramatically represents in an exemplary way what truly happens in life – that really heavy trials fall on a person, on a family, on a people, disproportionate trials in comparison to human lowliness and frailty. It often happens in life that “when it rains it pours”, as the saying goes. And some people are overcome by an accumulation of evil that truly seems excessive and unjust. It is like this with many people.

We have all known people like this. We have been impressed by their cry, but we have also stood in admiration at the firmness of their faith and love in their silence. I am thinking of parents of children with serious

disabilities, have you thought of the parents of children with serious disabilities? Their entire life.... I am thinking also of those who live with a permanent illness, or those who assist a member of their family.... These situations are often aggravated by the scarcity of economic resources. At certain junctures in history, the accumulation of burdens gives the impression that they were given a group appointment. This is what has happened in these years with the Covid-19 pandemic, and is happening now with the war in Ukraine.

Can we justify these “excesses” to the higher intelligence of nature and history? Can we religiously bless them as justified responses to the sins of the victims, as if they deserve it? No, we cannot. There is kind of right that victims have to protest vis-à-vis the mystery of iniquity, a right that God grants to everyone, that

indeed, He himself, inspires, after all. Sometimes I meet people who approach me and say: “But, Father, I protested against God because I have this and that problem....” But, you know, friend, that protesting is a way to pray when it is done like that. When children, when young people object against their parents, it is a way of attracting their attention and of asking that they take care of them. If you have some wound in your heart, some pain, and you want to object, object even to God. God will listen to you. God is a Father. God is not afraid of our prayer of protest, no! God understands. But be free, be free in your prayer. Don't imprison your prayer within preconceived paradigms! No! Prayer should be like this: spontaneous, like that of a child with his father, who say everything that comes out of his mouth because he knows his father understands him. In the first moment of the drama, God's “silence” signifies this.

God does not shy away from the confrontation, but, from the beginning, allows Job to give vent to his protest, and God listens. At times, perhaps we need to learn this respect and tenderness from God. And God does not like that encyclopedia – let's call it this – of explanations, of reflections that Job's friends do. These are things that come off the tip of their tongues which are not right – that type of religiosity that explains everything, but the heart remains cold. God does not like this. He likes Job's protest and silence more.

Job's profession of faith – which emerges precisely from his incessant appeal to God, to a supreme justice – concludes in the end with an almost mystical experience that makes him say, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (42:5). How many people, how many of us after an experience that is a bit ugly, a bit dark, take a

step and know God better than before! And we can say like Job: “I knew you because I had heard about you, but now I have seen you because I have encountered you”.

This testimony is *particularly believable if it is picked up in old age*, in its progressive frailty and loss. Those who are old have witnessed so many of these experiences in life! And they have also seen the inconsistency of human promises. Lawyers, scientists, even men of religion, who confuse the persecutor with the victim, insinuating that they are fully responsible for their own suffering. They are mistaken!

The elderly who find the path of this testimony, who *turn their resentment for their loss into a tenacity for awaiting God’s promises* – there is a change from resentment because of the loss toward the tenacity of seeking God’s promises – these older people are an irreplaceable garrison

for the community regarding the excesses of evil. The believer whose gaze is turned toward the Crucifix learns just that. May we learn this as well, from the many grandfathers and grandmothers, who like Mary, unite their sometimes heartbreaking prayers, to that of the Son of God who abandons himself to the Father on the cross. Let us look at old people, let us watch elderly men and women, the elderly. Let us watch them with love. Let us see their personal experiences. They have suffered so much in life, they have learned so much in life, they have gone through so much, but in the end they have this peace, a peace, I would say, that is almost mystical, that is, the peace from an encounter with God to the point they can say, "I knew you because I had heard about you, but now I have seen you with my own eyes." These elderly people resemble the peace of the Son of God

on the cross who is abandoned to the
Father.

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