

"Welcome Christians of another tradition"

In his general audience during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Pope Francis speaks about the "ecumenical" hospitality Paul encountered in the people of Malta.

01/22/2020

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today's catechesis is in tune with the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This year's theme, which is that of

hospitality, was developed by the communities of Malta and Gozo, starting from the passage from the Acts of the Apostles which tells of the hospitality reserved by the inhabitants of Malta to Saint Paul and his fellow travellers who were shipwrecked along with him. I referred to this very episode in my catechesis two weeks ago.

Let us therefore start again from the dramatic experience of that shipwreck. The ship on which Paul travels is at the mercy of the elements. For fourteen days they have been at sea, adrift, and since neither the sun nor the stars are visible, the travellers feel disoriented and lost. Below them the sea crashes violently against the ship, and they fear that the ship will break under the force of the waves. From above they are lashed by wind and rain. The force of the sea and the storm is terribly powerful and indifferent to

the fate of the sailors: there were more than 260 people!

But Paul, who knows it is not so, speaks. Faith tells him that his life is in the hands of God, Who raised Jesus from the dead, and Who called him, Paul, to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. His faith also tells him that God, according to what Jesus revealed, is a loving Father. Therefore Paul turns to his fellow travellers and, inspired by faith, announces to them that God will not allow a hair on their heads to be lost.

This prophecy will come true when the ship runs aground on the coast of Malta and all the passengers reach the mainland safely. And there they experience something new. In contrast to the brutal violence of the stormy sea, they receive testimony of the “rare humanity” of the island’s inhabitants. These people, foreign to them, are attentive to their needs.

They light a fire to keep them warm, offer them shelter from the rain and food. Even though they have not yet received the Good News of Christ, they manifest God's love in concrete acts of kindness. Indeed, spontaneous hospitality and thoughtful gestures communicate something of God's love. And the hospitality of the Maltese islanders is repaid by the miracles of healing that God works through Paul on the island. So if the people of Malta were a sign of God's Providence for the Apostle, he too bore witness to God's merciful love for them.

Dear friends, hospitality is important; and it is also an important ecumenical virtue. First and foremost it means recognizing that other Christians are truly our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are brothers and sisters. Someone will say to you: "But he is Protestant, he is Orthodox...". Yes, but we are

brothers in Christ. It is not a one-way act of generosity, because when we host other Christians we welcome them as a gift given to us. Like the Maltese – those Maltese were good – we are repaid, because we receive what the Holy Spirit has sown in these, our brothers and sisters, and this becomes a gift for us too, because the Holy Spirit also sows His graces everywhere. To welcome Christians of another tradition means first of all to show God's love for them, because they are children of God – our brothers and sisters – and also to welcome what God has accomplished in their lives.

Ecumenical hospitality requires a willingness to listen to others, paying attention to their personal stories of faith and the history of their community, communities of faith with a different tradition from ours. Ecumenical hospitality involves the desire to know the experience of God that other Christians have, and the

expectation of receiving the spiritual gifts that come with it. And this is a grace, discovering this is a grace. I think of times gone by, my homeland for example. When some evangelical missionaries came, a small group of Catholics went to burn the tents. This, no: it is not Christian. We are brothers, we are all brothers, and we must show hospitality to one another.

Today, the sea on which Paolo and his companions were shipwrecked is once again a dangerous place for the lives of other travellers. All over the world migrant men and women face risky voyages to escape violence, to escape war, to escape poverty. Just as Paul and his companions experience the indifference, the hostility of the desert, the rivers, the seas... Very often they are not permitted to land in ports. But, unfortunately, sometimes they also encounter the far worse hostility of men. They are

exploited by criminal traffickers. Today! They are treated like numbers and a threat by some rulers: today! Sometimes inhospitality throws them back, like a wave, towards poverty or the dangers from which they have fled.

We, as Christians, must work together to show migrants the love of God as revealed by Jesus Christ. We can and must testify that there is not only hostility and indifference, but rather that every person is precious to God and loved by Him. The divisions that still exist between us prevent us from being fully the sign of God's love. Working together to live ecumenical hospitality, especially towards those whose lives are most vulnerable, will make all us Christians – Protestants, Orthodox, Catholics, all Christians – better human beings, better disciples and a more united Christian people. It will

bring us even closer to unity, which is God's will for us.

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