

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 22 January 2020*

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good Morning,

Today's catechesis is in keeping with the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This year's theme, *hospitality*, was prepared by the communities of Malta and Gozo, starting with the first passage in the Acts of the Apostles which tells of the hospitality shown by the people of Malta to Saint Paul and his travelling companions who had been shipwrecked with him. I referred to this event in the catechesis of two weeks ago.

Let us thus continue from the dramatic experience of that shipwreck. The ship on which Paul was sailing was at the mercy of the elements. They had been adrift at sea for 14 days, and since neither the sun nor the stars were visible, the travellers felt disoriented and lost. Below them the sea lashed violently against the boat and they feared the vessel might break from the force of the waves. From above, they were whipped by wind and rain. The force of the sea and the storm was terrifying and indifferent to the fate of the passengers: there were more than 260 people [on board].

But Paul who knew that it was not so, speaks. Faith tells him that his life is in the hands of God who had resurrected Jesus from the dead and who had called him, Paul, that he might carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth. His faith also tells him that, according to what Jesus had revealed, God is a loving Father. Therefore Paul addresses his traveling companions and, inspired by faith, announces that God would not allow one hair of their head to be lost.

This prophecy comes true when the vessel runs aground on the coast of Malta and all the passengers reach land safely. And there they experience something new. In contrast to the brute force of the stormy sea, they witness the "unusual kindness" of the dwellers of that island. These people, who are foreign to them, are attentive to their needs. They light a fire so that they can warm up, they offer them shelter from the rain and food. Even though they had not yet received the Good News of Christ, they manifest God's love with practical kind actions. Indeed spontaneous hospitality and thoughtful gestures communicate something of God's love. And the hospitality of the Maltese islanders is rewarded by the miracles of healing that God works through Paul on the island. Thus, just as the people of Malta were a sign of God's Providence for the Apostle, so was he a witness to the merciful love of God for them.

My dearest ones, hospitality is important. And it is also an *important ecumenical virtue*. First of all it means recognizing that other Christians are truly our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are brothers and sisters. Some might say: "But he is Protestant, he is Orthodox ...". Yes, but we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. It is not a one way act of generosity because when we welcome other Christians, we welcome them as a gift that is given to us. Like the Maltese — these Maltese were good — we are rewarded because we receive what the Holy Spirit has sown in these brothers and sisters and this also becomes a gift for us because the Holy Spirit too sows his graces everywhere. Welcoming Christians from another tradition means firstly showing

God's love to them because they are children of God — our brothers and sisters — and moreover, it means welcoming what God has done in their lives. Ecumenical hospitality requires the willingness to listen to others, to pay attention to their personal stories of faith and to the respective history of their communities, communities of faith with another tradition that is different from ours. Ecumenical hospitality involves the desire to know the experience that other Christians have of God and waiting to receive the spiritual gifts that follow from that. And this is a grace. To discover this is a grace. I think of the past, of my land for example. When evangelical missionaries arrived, a small group of Catholics would burn their tents. Not this: it is not Christian. We are brothers and sisters, we are all brothers and sisters and we have to show hospitality to each other.

Today, the sea that shipwrecked Paul and his companions is once again a place of danger to the lives of other passengers. All over the world, men and women migrants face risky voyages to flee from violence, to flee from war, to flee from poverty. Just like Paul and his companions, they experience indifference, the hostility of the desert, rivers, seas... They are often not allowed to disembark at ports. But unfortunately, sometimes they are also met with far worse hostility from mankind. They are exploited by criminal traffickers: today! They are treated like numbers and like a threat by some government leaders: today! Sometimes the lack of hospitality drives them back like a wave, to the poverty or the very dangers they had fled.

As Christians we must work together to show migrants God's love revealed by Jesus Christ. We can and we must bear witness that there are not just hostility and indifference but that every person is precious to God and loved by him. The divisions that still exist among us prevent us from fully being a sign of God's love. Working together to exercise ecumenical hospitality, in particular to those whose lives are most vulnerable, will make us all Christians— Protestants, Orthodox, Catholics, all Christians — better human beings, better disciples and a more united Christian people. It will bring us closer to unity which is God's will for all of us.
