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| **JESUS' PRAYER BEFORE DYING**  Vatican City, (VIS) - The prayer of Jesus at the moment of His death, as narrated by St. Mark and St. Matthew was the theme of Benedict XVI's catechesis during his general audience, held this morning in the Paul VI Hall.  "In the structure of the narrative", the Pope said, "Jesus' cry rises at the end of three hours of darkness, which had descended upon the earth from midday to three o'clock in the afternoon. Those three hours of darkness were, in their turn, the continuation of an earlier period which also lasted three hours and began with the crucifixion. ... In biblical tradition darkness has an ambivalent meaning: it is a sign of the presence and action of evil, but also of the mysterious presence and action of God Who is capable of vanquishing all darkness. ... In the scene of Jesus' crucifixion darkness envelops the earth, the darkness of death in which the Son of God immerses Himself, in order bring life with His act of love".  "Insulted by various categories of people, surrounded by a darkness covering everything, at the very moment in which He is facing death Jesus' cry shows that, along with His burden of suffering and death apparently accompanied by abandonment and the absence of God, He is entirely certain of the closeness of the Father, Who approves this supreme act of love and of total giving of Self, although we do not hear His voice from on high as we did in earlier moments".  Yet, the Holy Father asked, "what is the meaning of Jesus' prayer? The cry addressed to the Father: 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" He explained that "the words Jesus addresses to the Father are the beginning of Psalm 22, in which the Psalmist expresses the tension between, on the one hand, being left alone and, on the other, the certain knowledge of God's presence amongst His people. ... The Psalmist speaks of a 'cry' to express all the suffering of his prayer before the apparently absent God. At moments of anguish prayer becomes a cry.  "This also happens in our own relationship with the Lord", the Pope added. "In the face of difficult and painful situations, when it seems that God does not hear, we must not be afraid to entrust Him with the burden we are carrying in our hearts, we must not be afraid to cry out to Him in our suffering".  "Jesus prays at the moment of ultimate rejection by man, at the moment of abandonment. However, He is aware that God the Father is present even at the instant in which He is experiencing the human drama of death. Yet nonetheless, a question arises in our hearts: how is it possible that such a powerful God does not intervene to save His Son from this terrible trial?"  The Holy Father explained that "it is important to understand that the prayer of Jesus is not the cry of a person who meets death with desperation, nor that of a person who knows he has been abandoned. At that moment Jesus appropriates Psalm 22, the Psalm of the suffering people of Israel, at that moment He takes upon Himself not only the suffering of His people, but also that of all men and women oppressed by evil. ... And He takes all this to the heart of God in the certainty that His cry will be heard in the resurrection. ... His is a suffering in communion with us and for us, it derives from love and carries within itself redemption and the victory of love.  "The people at the foot of Jesus' cross were unable to understand, they thought His cry was a supplication to Elijah. ... We likewise find ourselves, ever and anew, facing the 'today' of suffering, the silence of God - many times we say as much in our prayers - but we also find ourselves facing the 'today' of the Resurrection, of the response of God Who took our sufferings upon Himself, to carry them with us and give us the certain hope that they will be overcome".  "In our prayers", the Holy Father concluded, "let us bring God our daily crosses, in the certainty that He is present and listens to us. The cry of Jesus reminds us that in prayer we must cross the barrier of 'self' and our own problems, and open ourselves to the needs and sufferings of others. May the prayer of the dying Jesus on the cross teach us to pray with love for so many brothers and sisters who feel the burden of daily life, who are experiencing moments of difficulty, who suffer and hear no words of comfort, that they may feel the love of God Who never abandons us. |
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| **POPE CALLS FOR SOLIDARITY TOWARDS VICTIMS OF BAD WEATHER**  Vatican City, (VIS) - Following his catechises during this morning's general audience, Benedict XVI launched an appeal for solidarity with victims of the current period of extremely cold weather. "Over recent weeks", he said, "a wave of freezing weather has affected a number of regions in Europe causing great disruption and widespread damage. I wish to express my closeness to the people suffering such extreme meteorological conditions, and ask for prayers for the victims and their families. At the same time, I encourage people to show solidarity that, those affected by these tragic events may receive generous assistance". |
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| **COOPERATION WITH THE AUTHORITIES IS VITAL IN THE STRUGGLE TO COMBAT SEXUAL ABUSE**  Vatican City, (VIS) - Cardinal William Joseph Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, delivered a lecture before the international symposium "Towards Healing and Renewal" being held in Rome's Gregorian University from 6 to 9 February. The event brings together bishops and religious superiors from all over the world and aims to relaunch the Church's commitment to protecting minors and vulnerable people from abuse.  Speaking English, Cardinal Levada affirmed that for Church leaders the question under examination "is both delicate and urgent". It is "important not to lose sight of the gravity of these crimes" as we seek "to form the priests of today and tomorrow to be aware of this scourge and to eliminate it from the priesthood".  Cardinal Levada recalled how Blessed John Paul II's Motu Proprio "Sacramentorum sanctitatis tutela" clarified and updated the list of canonical crimes, explicitly including the sexual abuse of minors by clerics as one of the most serious crimes, or "graviora delicta". Benedict XVI, then prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "was instrumental in implementing these new norms" and supported "approving the Essential Norms for the United States". In 2010 Pope Benedict also approved and ordered the promulgation of stricter revised norms.  "In an effort to aid the Church universal to adopt appropriate measures ... the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a circular letter to assist episcopal conferences in developing guidelines for dealing with cases of sexual abuse of minors perpetrated by clerics". That letter, dated 2011, calls for standards to evaluate the suitability of clergy and other persons who minister in Church institutions and agencies; and for education programmes to be set up for families and Church communities to ensure the protection of children and young people.  "For many if not most victims a first need is to be heard, to know that the Church listens to their stories of abuse, that the Church understands the gravity of what they have suffered, that she wants to accompany them on the often long path of healing, and that she has taken or is willing to take effective steps to ensure that other children will be protected from such abuse", Cardinal Levada said. In this context he also noted the example set by the Holy Father in meeting with abuse victims during his apostolic trips.  The prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reiterated the fact that bishops and religious superiors must "exercise even greater scrutiny in accepting candidates for the priesthood and religious life, as well as providing formation programmes that provide the necessary foundational human formation, including appropriate formation in human sexuality".  "Certainly no less important than any of the other elements, the cooperation of the Church with civil authorities in these cases recognises the fundamental truth that the sexual abuse of minors is not only a crime in canon law, but is also a crime that violates criminal laws in most civil jurisdictions. ... The Church has an obligation to cooperate with the requirements of civil law regarding the reporting of such crimes to the appropriate authorities".  At the end of his address, Cardinal Levada expressed the hope that the symposium would be "a source of expertise and hope for those who seek to eliminate the scourge of sexual abuse of minors from society at large". |