



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

The bible narrative – with the symbolic language of the time in which it was written – tells us something shocking. God was so embittered by the widespread wickedness of humans, which had become a normal style of life, that he thought he had made a mistake in creating them and decided to eliminate them. A radical solution. It might even have a paradoxical twist of mercy. No more humans, no more history, no more judgment, no more condemnation. And many predestined victims of corruption, violence, injustice would be spared forever.

Does it not happen to us as times as well – overwhelmed by the sense of powerlessness against evil or demoralized by the “prophets of doom” – that we think it would be better if we had not been born? Should we give credit to some recent theories, which denounce the human race as an evolutionary detriment to life on our planet? All negative? No.

Indeed, we are under pressure, exposed to opposing stresses that confuse us. On the one hand, we have the optimism of an eternal youth, kindled by the extraordinary progress of technology, that depicts a future full of machines that are more efficient and more intelligent than us, that will cure our ills and devise for us the best solutions so as not to die: the world of robots. On the other hand, our imagination appears increasingly concentrated on the representation of a final

catastrophe that will extinguish us. What happens with an eventual nuclear war. The “day after” this – if there will still be days and human beings – will have to start again from scratch. Destroying everything to start again from scratch. I do not want to trivialize the idea of progress, naturally. But it seems that the symbol of the flood is gaining ground in our subconscious. Besides, the current pandemic puts a heavy weight on our carefree representation of the things that matter, for life and its destiny.

In the bible story, when it comes to saving life on earth from corruption and from the flood, God entrusts the task to the fidelity of the eldest of all, the “righteous” Noah. Will old age save the world, I wonder? In what sense? And how will old age save the world? And what is the prospect? Life after death or just survival until the flood?

A word of Jesus, that evokes “the days of Noah”, will help us to explore more deeply the meaning of the bible passage we have heard. Jesus, speaking about the end times, says, “As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be in the days of the Son of Man. They ate, they drank, they married, they were given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all” (*Lk 17:26-27*). Indeed, eating and drinking, taking a husband or wife, are very normal things and do not seem to be examples of corruption. Where is the corruption? Where is the corruption there? In reality, Jesus stresses the fact that human beings, when they limit themselves to enjoying life, lose even the perception of corruption, which mortifies their dignity and poisons meaning. When the perception of corruption is lost, and corruption becomes something normal: everything has its price, everything! Opinions, acts of justice, are bought and sold. This is common in the world of business, in the world of many professions. And corruption is even experienced in a carefree way, as if it were part of the normality of human wellbeing. When you go to do something, and it is slow, that process of doing things is a bit slow, how often do you hear: “Yes, but if you give me a tip, I will speed it up”. Very often. “Give me something and I will take it further”. We are well aware of this, all of us. The world of corruption seems to be part of the normality of the human being, and this is bad. This morning I spoke with a woman who told me about this problem in her homeland. The goods of life are consumed and enjoyed without concern for the spiritual quality of life, without care for the habitat of the common home. Everything is exploited, without concerning themselves with the mortification and disheartenment of which many suffer, nor with the evil that poisons the community. As long as normal life can be filled with “wellbeing”, we do not want to think about what makes it empty of justice and love. “But I am fine! Why should I think about problems, about wars, about human suffering, all that poverty, all that evil? No, I am fine. I don’t care about others”. This is the subconscious thought that leads us towards living in a state of corruption.

Can corruption become normal, I wonder? Brothers and sisters, unfortunately, yes. We can breathe the air of corruption just as we breath oxygen. “But it is normal; if you want me to do this faster, what will you give me?” It is normal! It is normal, but it is a bad thing, it is not good! What paves the way for this? One thing: the carefreeness that turns only to self-care: this is the gateway

to the corruption that sinks the lives of all of us. Corruption benefits greatly from this ungodly carefreeness. When everything is going well for someone, and others do not matter to him or her: this thoughtlessness it weakens our defenses, it dulls our consciences and it turns us – even involuntarily – into accomplices. Because corruption is not solitary: a person always has accomplices. And corruption always spreads, it spreads.

Old age is in a good position to grasp the deception of this normalization of a life obsessed with enjoyment and empty of interiority: life without thought, without sacrifice, without beauty, without truth, without justice, without love: this is all corruption. The special sensibility of us old people, of old age for the attention, thoughts and affections that make us human, should once again become the vocation of many. And it will be a choice of the love of the elderly towards the new generations. We will be the ones to sound the alarm, the alert: “Be aware, this is corruption, it will bring you nothing”. There is a great need today for the wisdom of the elderly to counteract corruption. The new generations expect of us, the elderly, a word that is prophecy, that opens the doors to new perspectives outside that carefree world of corruption, of the habit of corrupt things. God’s blessing chooses old age, for this charism that is so human and humanizing. What is the meaning of my old age? Each one of us elderly people can ask ourselves this. The meaning is this: being a prophet of corruption and saying to others: “Stop, I have taken this road and it does not lead you anywhere! Now I will tell you about my experience”. We, the elderly, should be prophets against corruption, just as Noah was the prophet against the corruption of his time, because he was the only one in whom God trusted. I ask you all – and I also ask myself: is my heart open to being a prophet against corruption today? It is a bad thing, when seniors do not mature, and become old people with the same corrupt habits of the young. Think of the bible story of the judges of Susanna: they are the example of a corrupt old age. And we, with this type of old age, would not be capable of being prophets for the young generations.

And Noah is the example of this generative old age: it is not corrupt, it is generative. Noah does not preach, he does not complain, he does not recriminate, but rather he takes care of the future of the generation that is in danger. We seniors must take care of the young, of children who are in danger. He builds the ark of acceptance and lets people and animals enter it. In his care for life, in all its forms, Noah obeys God’s commandment, repeating the tender and generous gesture of creation, which in reality is the very thought that inspires the command of God: a new blessing, a new creation (cf. *Gen 8: 15-9,17*). Noah’s vocation remains ever relevant. The holy patriarch must once again intercede for us. And we, women and men of a certain age – so as not to say elderly, as some will be offended – let us not forget that we have the possibility of wisdom, of saying to others: “Look, this path of corruption leads nowhere”. We must be like the good wine that, once aged, can give a good message, not a bad one.

I appeal today to all those people who are of a certain age, so as not to say elderly. Be careful: you have the responsibility to denounce the human corruption in which we live and in which this way of living of relativism goes on, totally relative, as if everything were legitimate. Let us move

forward. The world needs strong young people, who move forward, and wise elders. Let us ask the Lord for the grace of wisdom.

Special Greetings

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, especially the groups from Denmark, Jerusalem, Norway and the United States of America. May our Lenten journey bring us to celebrate Easter with hearts purified and renewed by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Upon each of you, and your families, I invoke joy and peace in Christ our Redeemer.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters: In our continuing catechesis on the meaning and value of old age, viewed in the light of God's word, we now consider the vital role of the elderly in handing on to new generations life's true and sustaining values. In the very first pages of the Bible, God entrusts to the elderly Noah the task of restoring the goodness of his creation, which had become corrupted by the spread of violence and wickedness. Jesus himself speaks of the "days of Noah" in warning us of the need for conversion in view of the imminent coming of God's Kingdom, which brings mankind definitive salvation and spiritual renewal. In every age, as in the days of Noah, we can be tempted to accept sin and corruption as normal, to avert our eyes from the unjust suffering of the poor and the destruction of our natural environment. In our own day, these are the fruits of a materialistic, self-centred and spiritually empty culture of waste. The elderly, like Noah, can warn us of this danger and remind us of our God-given call to be guardians and stewards of his creation. May Noah's example and prayers inspire our elderly to appreciate this, their special charism, and help to build a new "ark" of welcome, care and hope, for the future of our world and the dawn of the new creation.