GENERAL AUDIENCE: On Jesus as ‘Divine Doctor’

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Below is a ZENIT translation of Pope Francis’ address at this morning’s General Audience in St. Peter’s Square:

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Dear Brothers and Sisters, good morning!

We heard the Gospel of the calling of Matthew. Matthew was a “publican,” namely a tax collector for the Roman Empire and, therefore, considered a public sinner. However, Jesus called him to follow Him and to become His disciple. Matthew accepted, and invited Him to dine in his home together with the disciples. Then a discussion arose between the Pharisees and Jesus’ disciples because the latter shared the table with publicans and sinners. “But you can’t go to these people’s house,” they said Jesus, in fact, does not move away from them, rather He frequents their homes and sits by them. This means that they also can become His disciples. Likewise, it is true that to be Christians does not make us sinless. Like the publican Matthew, each one of us entrusts himself to the Lord’s grace despite our sins. We are all sinners; we have all sinned. By calling Matthew, Jesus shows sinners that He does not look at their past, at their social condition, at external conventions, but rather opens a new future to them. Once I heard a good saying: “There is no saint without a past and there is no sinner without a future.” This is what Jesus does. There is no saint without a past or sinner without a future. Suffice it to respond to the invitation with a humble and sincere heart. The Church is not a community of the perfect, but of disciples on the way, who follow the Lord because they recognize themselves sinners and in need of His forgiveness. Therefore, the Christian life is a school of humility that is open to grace.

Such behavior is not understood by one with the presumption of believing himself “just” and better than others. Arrogance and pride do not enable one to recognize oneself in need of salvation; instead, they impede seeing the merciful face of God and of acting with mercy. They are a wall. Arrogance and pride are a wall, which impedes a relationship with God. Yet, Jesus’ mission is precisely this: to come in search of each one of us, to heal our wounds and call us to follow Him with love. He said it clearly: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (v. 12). Jesus presents Himself as a good doctor! He proclaims the Kingdom of God, and the signs of His coming are evident: He heals sicknesses, frees from fear, from death and from the devil. Before Jesus, no sinner is excluded — no sinner is excluded! — because God’s healing power knows not infirmities that cannot be cured; and this must give us confidence and open our heart to the Lord so that He will come and heal us. Calling sinners to His table, He heals them, re-establishing them in the vocation they thought was lost and that the Pharisees had forgotten: that of guests at the banquet of God. According to Isaiah’s prophecy: “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined. And he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth; for the Lord has spoken’ (25:6-9).

If the Pharisees see only sinners in the guests and refuse to sit with them, Jesus on the contrary reminds them that they are also God’s table companions. So, to sit at table with Jesus means to be transformed and saved by Him. Jesus’ table is twofold in the Christian community: there is the table of the Word and there is the table of the Eucharist (cf. Dei Verbum, 21). These are the medicines with which the Divine Doctor heals and nourishes us. With the first – the Word – He reveals Himself and invites us to a dialogue between friends. Jesus was not afraid to dialogue with sinners, publicans, prostitutes. No, he was not afraid; He loved all! His Word penetrates us and, as a scalpel, operates in depth to free us from the evil that nests in our life. Sometimes this Word is painful, because it cuts into hypocrisies, unmasks false excuses, exposes the hidden truth but, at the same time, it illumines and purifies, gives strength and hope, is a precious re-constituent of our journey of faith. For its part, the Eucharist nourishes us with the very life of Jesus and, as a very powerful medicine continually renews the grace of our Baptism in a mysterious way. By approaching the Eucharist, we nourish ourselves with the Body and Blood of Jesus, though, coming into us, it is Jesus that unites us to His Body!

Concluding the dialogue with the Pharisees, Jesus reminds them of a word of the prophet Hosea (6:6): “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice” (Matthew 9:13). Addressing the people of Israel, the prophet reproves them because the prayers they raised were empty and incoherent words. Despite God’s covenant and mercy, the people often lived with a “facade” religiosity, without living profoundly the Lord’s command. See why the prophet insisted: “I desire mercy,” that is, the loyalty of a heart that recognizes its sins, that repents and turns to be faithful to the covenant with God. “And not sacrifice”: every religious action is ineffectual without a repentant heart! Jesus applies this prophetic phrase also to human relations: the Pharisees were very religious in the form, but they were not willing to share the table with publicans and sinners; they did not acknowledge the possibility of repentance and hence of healing; they did not put mercy in the first place: though being faithful custodians of the Law, they showed they did not know God’s heart! It is as if you were given a parcel with a gift inside and you, instead of looking for the gift, look only at the paper in which it is wrapped: only the appearances, the form, and not the kernel of grace, the gift that is being given!

Dear brothers and sisters, we are all invited to the table of the Lord. Let us make our own the invitation to sit by Him together with His disciples. Let us learn to look with mercy and to recognize in every one of them a table companion of ours. We are all disciples in need of experiencing and living the consoling word of Jesus. We are all in need of nourishing ourselves of God’s mercy, because it is from this source that our salvation flows. Thank you!