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"Baptism is the beginning of hope"

After a summer break in July, Pope Francis returned to his reflections on the Christian virtue of hope, in his August 2 general audience.

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Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

There was a time when churches were oriented toward the East. You entered the sacred building from a door at the west end and, walking

along the nave, you moved eastward. It was an important symbol for old-world man, an allegory which, in the course of history, has gradually died out. We men and women of the modern epoch, much less accustomed to grasping the great signs of the cosmos, hardly ever notice details of this sort. The West is the cardinal point of the setting sun, where the light dies out. The East, however, is the place where the shadows are overcome by the first light of dawn and it reminds us of Christ, the Sun risen on high, at the world's horizon (cf. Lk 1:78).

The ancient Rites of Baptism called for the catechumens to pronounce the first part of their profession of faith keeping their gaze turned to the West. And in that stance they were asked: "Do you renounce Satan, his service and his works?" — and the future Christians repeated in chorus: "I do!" Then they turned toward the

apse, in the direction of the East, where the light is born, and the candidates for Baptism were again questioned: "Do you believe in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?" And this time they responded: "I do!"

In modern times the appeal of this Rite has been partially lost: we have lost sensitivity to the language of the cosmos. Naturally there remains the profession of faith made according to the Baptismal interrogation, which is proper to the celebration of several sacraments. However its significance remains intact. What does it mean to be Christians? It means looking to the light, continuing to make the profession of faith in the light, even when the world is enveloped in darkness and shadows.

Christians are not exempt from external and even internal shadows. They do not live outside of the world, however; by the grace of Christ

received in Baptism they are “oriented” men and women: they do not believe in darkness, but in the dim light of day; they do not succumb to the night, but hope in the dawn; they are not defeated by death, but yearn to rise again; they are not cowered by evil, because they always trust in the infinite possibilities of good. And this is our Christian hope: the light of Jesus, the salvation that Jesus brings to us with his light that saves us from the darkness.

We are those who believe that God is Father: this is the light! We are not orphans; we have a Father and our Father is God. We believe that Jesus descended among us; he shared our life, making himself companion above all to the poorest and most frail: this is the light! We believe that the Holy Spirit works unceasingly for the good of humanity and of the world, and that even the worst suffering of history will be

overcome: this is the hope that awakens us each morning! We believe that every affection, every friendship, every good yearning, every love, even the most minute and neglected, one day will find fulfilment in God: this is the power that spurs us to embrace our daily life with enthusiasm! And this is our hope: to live in hope and live in light, in the light of God the Father, in the light of Jesus the Saviour, in the light of the Holy Spirit who urges us to go forth in life.

There is then another very beautiful sign of the baptismal liturgy that reminds us of the importance of light. At the end of the Rite, the parents—if it is a child—or the baptized themselves—if they are adults—are consigned a candle, whose flame is lit from the Paschal Candle. It is a large candle that on Easter night enters the completely dark church, to demonstrate the

mystery of Jesus' Resurrection; from that candle everyone lights their own candle and passes the flame on to those nearby: in that sign is the slow propagation of the Resurrection of Jesus in the lives of all Christians. The life of the Church—I will say a rather strong word—is *contaminazione*, a contagion of light. The more light of Jesus we Christians have, the more light of Jesus there is in the life of the Church, the more alive she is. The life of the Church is the contagion of light.

The most beautiful exhortation that we can address to each other is to always remember our Baptism. I would like to ask you: how many of you remember the date of your Baptism? Do not answer because some may feel embarrassed! Think, and if you do not remember it, today you have homework to do: go to your mom, to your dad, to your aunt, to your uncle, to your grandma,

grandpa, and ask them: "What is the date of my Baptism?" And never forget it again! Is that clear? Will you do it? Today's task is to learn or remember the date of Baptism, which is the date of rebirth; it is the date of light; it is the date in which—allow me to say—in which we were "infected" by the light of Christ. We are born twice over: the first time into natural life; the second, thanks to the encounter with Christ, at the Baptismal font. There we died unto death, in order to live as children of God in this world. There we became human as we never could have imagined. This is why we all must spread the fragrance of the Chrism, with which we were anointed on the day of our Baptism. In us lives and operates the Spirit of Jesus, first born of many brothers and sisters, of all those who oppose the inevitability of darkness and death.

What a grace it is when a Christian truly becomes a “cristo-foro,” which means “bearer of Jesus” in the world! Above all for those who are experiencing situations of grief, of despair, of darkness and of hate. This can be understood from many fine details: from the light that a Christian conserves in his eyes, from the foundation of peace which is not undermined even on the most complicated of days, from the wish to begin to love again even when we have experienced many disappointments. In the future, when the story of our days is written, what will it say about us? That we were capable of hope, or that we put our light under a bushel? If we are true to our Baptism, we will spread the light of the hope—Baptism is the beginning of hope, that hope—of God, and we will be able to pass on to future generations the meaning of life.

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