



The Holy See

MEETING WITH THE PRIESTS OF THE DIOCESE OF ROME

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

Basilica of Saint John Lateran

Thursday, 7 March 2019

[Multimedia]

Good morning to all of you.

It is always lovely to gather again each year, at the beginning of Lent, for this liturgy of the forgiveness of God. It does us good — it does me good too! — and I feel great peace at heart, now that each one of us has received God’s mercy and has offered it to others, his brothers. Let us live this moment for what it truly is, as an extraordinary grace, an enduring miracle of divine tenderness, in which once again the Reconciliation of God, the sister of Baptism, moves us, cleanses us with tears, regenerates us, restores our original beauty.

This peace and this gratitude that rise up to the Lord from our heart help us to understand how the entire Church and each of her children live and grow thanks to the mercy of God. The Bride of the Lamb becomes “without spot or wrinkle” (Eph 5:27) as a gift from God; her beauty is the end point of a journey of purification and transfiguration, that is, of an *exodus* to which the Lord forever invites her: “behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her” (Hos 2:14). We must never cease placing ourselves mutually on guard against the temptation to be self-sufficient and self-satisfied, almost as if we were the People of God by our initiative or by our merit. This withdrawal into self is deplorable and will always do us harm: both self-sufficiency in deeds or the sin of the mirror, self-satisfaction: “How beautiful I am! How good I am!”. We are not People of God by our initiative, by our merit; no, truly we are and will always be the fruit of the merciful action of the Lord: a proud People laid low by God’s humility, a People of wretches — let us not be afraid to say this word: “I am a wretch” — enriched by God’s poverty, an accursed People rendered just by the One who himself becomes “a curse” for us, hung on the wood of the

Cross (cf. Gal 3:13). Let us never forget it: “apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). I repeat, the Teacher told us: “apart from me you can do nothing!”. And thus the perspective changes; I am not looking at my reflection in the mirror; I am not the centre of activities, much less the centre of prayer, so often.... No, no. He is the centre. I am on the periphery. He is the centre. It is He who does everything, and this requires of us a holy passivity — laziness is not holy, no, that is not — but holy passivity before God, before Jesus especially: it is He who is at work.

This is why this Season of Lent is truly a grace: it allows us to recollect ourselves before God, allowing Him to be *all in all*. His love raises us from the dust (*remember that without me you are dust*, the Lord said to us yesterday); His Spirit once again blown upon our nostrils gives us the life of the risen. The hand of God that created us in the image and likeness of his Trinitarian mystery has made us manifold in unity, different but inseparable from one another. God’s forgiveness, which we have celebrated today, is a power that reestablishes communion at all levels: among us presbyters in the one diocesan presbytery; with all Christians, in the one Body which is the Church; with all mankind, in the unity of the human family. The Lord presents us to each other and says to us: here is your brother, “bone of your bones, flesh of your flesh” (cf. Gen 2:23), the one with whom you are called to live the “love that never ends” (1 Cor 13:8).

I have proposed the Book of Exodus as the paradigm for these seven years of the diocesan journey of pastoral conversion, which separate us from the Jubilee of 2025 (we have reached the second). The Lord acts, then as today, and transforms a “non-people” into the People of God. This is his wish and his plan for us too.

Well, what can the Lord do when he must sadly discover that Israel is a “stiff-necked people” (Ex 32:9), “set on evil” (32:22) as in the episode of the golden calf? He sets about a patient work of reconciliation, a wise pedagogy, in which he threatens and consoles, raises awareness of the consequences of the wrong done and decides to forget the sin, punishes by striking the people and healing the wounds he has inflicted. Precisely in the text of Exodus 32-34, which you will propose during Lent for the meditation of your communities, the Lord seems to have taken a radical decision: “I will not go up among you” (Ex 33:3). When the Lord withdraws, distances himself. We have experienced this, in bad moments of spiritual desolation. If some of you have not experienced these moments, I advise you to go and speak with a good confessor, with a spiritual father, because something is lacking in your life; I do not know what it is but not feeling desolate ... is not normal; I would say that it is not Christian. We experience these moments. I will no longer walk ahead of you; I shall send my angel (cf. Ex 32:34) to go before you on the journey; I will not go. When the Lord leaves us on our own, without his presence, and we are in the parish, we are working and we feel occupied but without the Lord’s presence, in desolation.... Not only in consolation, in desolation. Think about this.

On the other hand the people, perhaps due to impatience or feeling abandoned (because Moses tarried before coming down the mountain), had set aside the prophet chosen by God and had

asked Aaron to create an idol, a mute image of God that would walk ahead of them. The people could not abide Moses' absence; they were desolate, could not wait, and immediately sought another god in order to be at ease. At times, when we do not feel desolation, it may be that we have idols. "No, I am fine with what I have arranged...". May you never experience the distress of God's abandonment. What does the Lord do when we "cut Him out" — with idols — of the life of our communities, because we are convinced of being self-sufficient? At that moment I am the idol: "No, I will make do.... Thank you.... Do not worry, I will manage". And we do not feel that need of the Lord; we do not feel the desolation of the Lord's absence.

But the Lord is clever! The reconciliation He wishes to offer to the people will be a lesson that the Israelites will remember forever. God always behaves like a jilted lover: if you really do not want me, then I am leaving! And He leaves us alone. It is true, we can make it alone, for a little while, six months, a year, two years, three years, even more. At a certain point this explodes. If we go forth alone, this self-sufficiency, this self-satisfaction, this solitary complaisance explodes. And it explodes badly; it explodes badly. I am thinking of the case of a really good, religious priest. I knew him well. He was brilliant. If there was a problem in some community, his superiors turned to him to resolve the problem: a college, a university. He was really good. But he was devoted to the "holy mirror": he looked at himself a lot. And God was good to him. One day God let him feel that he was alone in life, that he had missed a great deal. And he did not dare say to the Lord: "But I arranged this, that, the other thing...". No, he immediately realized he was alone. And the greatest grace the Lord can give, I think it is the greatest grace: that man wept. The grace of tears. He wept for lost time; he wept because the holy mirror had not given him what he had expected of himself. And he started over again, humbly. When the Lord leaves, because we push Him away, we need to ask for the gift of tears, to weep for the Lord's absence. "You do not want me, so I am leaving", the Lord says, and with time what happens is what happened to this priest.

Let us return to Exodus. The result was as expected: "When the people heard these evil tidings, they mourned; and no man put on his ornaments" (33:4). It did not escape the Israelites that no punishment is as heavy as this divine decision that belies His holy name: "I am who I am" (3:14): an expression that has a concrete meaning, not abstract, perhaps translatable as "I am the One who is and will be here, beside you". When you realize that He has gone, because you have pushed Him away, it is a grace to feel this. If you do not realize it, there is suffering. The angel is not a solution; on the contrary, he would be the permanent witness to God's absence. This is why the people's reaction is sorrow. This is another dangerous thing, because there is good sorrow and bad sorrow. There one must discern, in moments of sorrow: what is this sorrow, where does it come from? And at times it is good: it comes from God, from the absence of God, as in this case; at other times it too is self-satisfaction, is it not true?

What would we feel if the Risen Lord should tell us: continue your ecclesial activities and your liturgies, but I will no longer be present and acting in your sacraments? Since, when you take your decisions, you base them on worldly and not Gospel criteria (*tamquam Deus non esset*), then I will

step aside completely.... Everything will be empty, devoid of meaning; there will be nothing but “dust”. God’s threat opens the way to the insight of what our life would be without Him, should He truly turn His Face away forever. It is death, despair, hell: apart from me you can do nothing. The Lord shows us once again, in living flesh through the unmasking of our hypocrisy, what His mercy really is. To Moses on the mountain, God reveals His Glory and His holy Name: “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex 34:6). In the “game of love” played by God, made of threatened absence and of restored presence — “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest” (Ex 33:14) — God brings about reconciliation with his People. Israel comes out of this painful experience, which will forever mark it, with a new maturity: it is more aware of who the God is who freed it from Egypt; it clearly understands the true dangers of the journey (we might say: it is more fearful of itself than of the serpents in the desert!). This is good: to be a bit fearful of ourselves, of our omnipotence, of our shrewdness, of our concealment, of our subterfuge.... A bit of fear. If it were possible, to be more fearful of this than of serpents, because this is the true venom. And thus, the people are more united around Moses and the Word of God that he proclaims. The experience of sin and of God’s forgiveness is what enabled Israel to become a little more the People who belong to God.

We have celebrated this Penitential Liturgy and come to terms with our sins; and can say that sin is something that opens us to God’s mercy, because usually sin is concealed. We hide sin not only from God, not only from our neighbour, not only from the priest, but from ourselves. The “disguise” has really made headway, as such: we are specialists at glossing over situations. “Yes, but it is not for long, it is understood...”. And a little water to wash off the makeup does everyone good, so as to see that we are not so beautiful: we are ugly, also ugly in our actions. But without despair, because God is there, benevolent and merciful; he is always behind us. There is His mercy that accompanies us.

Dear brothers, this is the meaning of Lent which we will experience. In the Spiritual Exercises that you will preach to the people of your communities, in the Penitential Liturgies that you will celebrate, may you have the courage to propose the Lord’s reconciliation, to propose his impassioned and protective love.

Our role is like that of Moses’: generous service in the work of God’s reconciliation, “playing his game” of love. God’s way of involving Moses is beautiful. He truly treats him as his friend: God prepares him before he goes down the mountain by warning him of the perversion of the people; He agrees that Moses may intercede for his brothers and sisters; He listens to Moses as he reminds Him of the vow that He, God, had made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We can imagine that God smiled when Moses invited Him not to contradict himself, not to make a bad impression in the eyes of the Egyptians and not to be less than their gods, to have respect for His holy Name. God provokes him with the dialectic of responsibility: “Your people, whom you, Moses, brought out of Egypt”, but Moses responds emphatically that no, the people belong to God; He is the One who brought them out of Egypt.... This is a mature dialogue with the Lord. When we see that the people

whom we serve in the parish, or anywhere, distance themselves, we tend to say: “They are my people; they are my people”. Yes, they are your people, but vicariously. Let us say it this way: the people are His! And thus, reproaching Him: “Look at what Your people are doing”. Have this dialogue with the Lord.

But God’s heart rejoiced when he heard Moses’ words: “if thou wilt forgive their sin — and if not, blot me ... out of thy book which thou has written” (Ex 32:32). This is one of the most beautiful actions of a priest, of the priest who goes before the Lord and stands up for his people. “They are Your people, not mine, and You must forgive them” — “No, but...” — “I am leaving! I will not speak to You any more. Blot me out”. It takes “grit” to speak this way to God! But we have to speak like this, as men, not as cowards, as men! Because this means that I am aware of the place I hold in the Church, that I am not an administrator, put there to administer ordinary affairs. It means that I believe, that I have faith. Try to address God this way.

To die for the people, to share the people’s destiny at whatever cost, even dying for it. Moses did not accept God’s proposal; he did not accept corruption. God pretends to want to corrupt him. He did not accept. “No I will not go along with this. I am with the people. With *your* people”. God’s proposal was: “let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; but of you I will make a great nation (Ex 32:10)”. — this is “corruption”. Really? Is God the corrupter? He is trying to see the heart of his shepherd. Moses does not want to save himself; he is, by now, one with his brothers. If only each of us were to reach this point, if only! It is bad when a priest goes to the bishop to complain about his people: “Ah, we can’t, these people do not understand anything, and so on and so forth ... it is a waste of time...”. It is bad! What does that man lack? That priest lacks many things! Moses does not do this. He does not want to save himself because he is one with his brothers. Here, the Father has seen the countenance of his Son. The light of the Spirit of God has imbued Moses’ face and has traced on it the likeness of the Risen Crucified One, rendering him luminous. And when we go there to fight with God — our father Abraham too had done this, that fighting with God — when we go there we show that we resemble Jesus who gives his life for his people. And the Father smiles: he will see in us the gaze of Jesus who went to his death for us, for the people *of the Father*, that is, us. The heart of God’s friend has fully expanded, becoming large — Moses, God’s friend — akin to God’s heart, much larger than the human heart (cf. 1 Jn 3:18). Moses truly became the friend who speaks with God face to face (Ex 33:11). Face to face! This is when the bishop or a spiritual father asks a priest if he prays: “Yes, yes, I ... yes. I manage with the ‘mother-in-law’ —the ‘mother-in-law’ is the Breviary — I make do, I say the Lauds, then ...”. No, no. If you pray, what does it mean? If you stand up for your people before God. If you go to defend your people with God. This is prayer, for a priest. It is not observing prescriptions. “Ah Father, so now we no longer use the Breviary?”. No, we do use the Breviary, but with this attitude. You are there, before God, and your people are behind you. And Moses is also the custodian of the Glory of God, of the secrets of God. He contemplated God’s Glory. He contemplated the Glory from behind His back; he heard His true Name on the mountain; he understood His Paternal Love.

Dear brothers, ours is an enormous privilege! God knows our “shameful nakedness”. I was really struck when I saw the original [Virgin] Odigitria of Bari: not as she is now, dressed somewhat in the garb that Oriental Christians place on the icon. It is Our Lady with the *naked* child. I was really pleased that the Bishop of Bari gave me one of these; he gave it to me as a gift, and I placed it there, in front of my door. And I like it — I say this to share an experience — in the morning, when I get up, when I pass before it, I like to ask Our Lady to safeguard my nakedness: “Mother you know all my nakedness”. This is a great thing: to ask the Lord — in my nakedness — to ask that my nakedness be safeguarded. She knows all of it. God knows our “shameful nakedness”, yet He never tires of using us to offer reconciliation to mankind. We are the poorest, sinners, yet God takes us to intercede for our brothers and sisters and to dispense regenerative salvation to mankind, through our not-at-all innocent hands.

Sin disfigures, and we have a painful, humiliating experience of it when we ourselves or one of our brother priests or bishops falls into the bottomless pit of vice, of corruption, or even worse, of crimes that ruin the lives of others. I would like to share with you the pain and the unbearable suffering that the scandals — which fill newspapers throughout the world — cause in us and in the entire ecclesial body. It is evident that the true meaning of what is happening is to be found in the spirit of evil, in the Enemy, who acts with the pretense of being master of the world, as I said in the [eucharistic liturgy at the end of the Meeting on the Protection of Minors in the Church](#) (24 February 2019). Yet, let us not be disheartened! The Lord is purifying his Bride and is converting all of us to Him. He is making us experience the trial so that we may understand that without Him we are dust. He is saving us from hypocrisy, from the spirituality of appearances. He is blowing his Spirit to restore beauty to his Bride, caught in the act of adultery. It will do us good today to take up chapter 16 of Ezekiel. This is the history of the Church. This is my history, each one of us can say. And in the end, but through shame, you will continue to be shepherds. Our humble repentance, which remains silent amid tears before the monstrosity of the sin and the unfathomable greatness of God’s forgiveness; this, this humble repentance is the beginning of our holiness.

Do not be afraid to stake your life at the service of reconciliation between God and mankind: we have been given no secret greatness other than this, that of giving our life so that mankind may know His love. A priest’s life is often marked by misunderstandings, silent suffering, at times persecution. And also sins that He alone knows. The laceration among brothers of our community, the non-reception of the Gospel Word, contempt for the poor, resentment fuelled by reconciliations that have never come to pass, the scandal caused by the shameful behaviour of some confreres: all this can leave us sleepless and powerless. However, let us believe in the patient guidance of God, who does things in his time; let us widen our heart and place ourselves at the service of the Word of reconciliation.

Let us propose to our communities what we have experienced in this Cathedral today. In the Penitential Liturgies that we will celebrate in parishes and prefectures, in this Lenten Season, each person will ask God and our brothers and sisters for forgiveness of the sins that have undermined

the ecclesial community and smothered missionary dynamism. With humility — which is a characteristic proper to God's heart, but which requires so much effort to make our own — let us confess to one another that we need God to reshape our life.

May you be the first to ask forgiveness of your brothers. Self-blame “is the beginning of wisdom and bound to the holy fear of God” (*ibid.*). It would be a good sign if, as we have done today, each of you would go to confess to a confrere, also in the Penitential Liturgies in the parish, before the eyes of the faithful. We will have a luminous face, like Moses, if, with emotion in our eyes, we speak to others of the mercy that has been applied to us. It is the way; there is no other. In this way, if the miracle of reconciliation of our communities occurs, we will see the demon of pride fall as a flash of lightening from heaven. We will feel we are a little more the People who belong to the Lord, whom God walks among. This is the way.

And I wish you a good Lenten Season!

Now I would like to add something that I was asked to do. One of the tangible ways to live a Lenten Season of charity and to contribute generously to the “As it is in heaven, likewise on the journey” campaign, with which our diocesan *Caritas* intends to respond to all forms of poverty, by welcoming and supporting those in need. I know that every year you respond generously to this appeal, but this year I ask you for a greater commitment so that the whole community and all the communities may truly be involved in the first person.

Before concluding the meeting, the Pope gave those present a booklet entitled “La riconciliazione, ‘sorella del battesimo’”, [“Reconciliation, the ‘sister of Baptism’”], a publication of the Diocese of Rome which compiles several texts for the Office of the Daily Readings for Lent, taken from a book by the same name written by Bishop Gianmarco Busca of Mantua. “It is the booklet”, Cardinal De Donatis explained, “that will accompany us during Lent, as the second Reading, as we did last year: the same size as the Breviary, thus it will be helpful to have at hand. Therefore the prefects are distributing these texts to everyone, and perhaps you can also take some for those who are not present”. Then, addressing the Pope, the Cardinal continued: “On everyone’s behalf, I would like to express truly heartfelt gratitude to you, for coming here today, as every year. What I can say on behalf of everyone, in addition to ‘thank you’, is that we continue to support you with our daily prayers”. The Pontiff responded:

I need this, I am in need of prayer. Pray for me. One of the things I like the most about this [booklet] is the richness of the Fathers: turn to the Fathers. A short time ago in a parish of Rome, a book — “*Bisogno di paternità*” [“A need for paternity”], I think it is called — was launched, containing texts of all the Fathers according to various themes: virtues, the Church.... Turning to the Fathers helps us a great deal because it is greatly rewarding. Thank you.

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