



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAЕ

Return to the first Galilee

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Pope Francis focused his homily on “the image of a disciple”. Inspired by the story of John the Baptist’s ministry and death, as told in the Gospel of Mark (6:14-29), the Pope said that John was “a man who had a short life, a short time to announce the Word of God”. He was “the man who God had sent to prepare the way for his Son”. But “John’s death was brutal”; he was beheaded at the order of Herod. He became “the price of a show for the royal court gathered at a banquet”. “Where the court was concerned many things were acceptable: corruption, vices, and crimes. The court favoured these things”, the Pope said.

The Pope then described the figure of St John the Baptist, pointing to three fundamental characteristics. “What did John do? Before all else”, the Pope said, “he announced the Lord. He announced that the Savior, the Lord, was coming; that the Kingdom of God was near”. He proclaimed this “forcefully: baptizing and leading people to repentance”. John “was a strong man who announced Jesus Christ: he was the prophet who was closest to Jesus Christ. So close that he himself pointed others to him”. In fact, when he saw Jesus he exclaimed: “It is him!”.

The second characteristic of John, the Pope explained, “is that he did not allow himself to become possessed by his own moral authority”, even when “the opportunity to say ‘I am the Messiah’ was offered to him on a platter”. John had “a great moral authority! All the people came to him. The Gospel says that the scribes would “approach him to ask ‘what should we do?’”, as did the people

and even soldiers. “Repent!” was John’s reply, and “do not steal!”.

“The Pharisees and doctors” also noticed the “strength” of John, and could see that he was “a righteous man. Because of this they went to him and asked: are you the Messiah?”. To John, this was a “moment of temptation and vanity”. He could have responded: “I cannot speak about this”, and in this way he would be “leaving the question open. Or he could have responded: I do not know... with false humility”. Instead, John “was clear” and said: “No, I am not! After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie”.

John did not fall into the temptation of stealing “the title, he did not master that trade”. He clearly proclaimed “I am a voice, and nothing more. The Word will come next. I am only a voice!”. This is the second point, that John “did not steal dignity”. He was a “man of truth”.

“The third characteristic of John”, the Pope continued, “was that he imitated Christ, he imitated Jesus. He did this to the point that, in those times, the Pharisees and the doctors believed that he was the Messiah”. Even “Herod, who had him killed, believed that Jesus was John”. This very fact shows the extent to which John had “followed the way of Jesus, especially in humility”. “John was humiliated, and humbled himself even to the end, to his death”. He went to meet the “same shameful death” as the Lord, “Jesus punished as a robber, a thief, a criminal on a cross”. John was the victim of “a weak and lustful man” who was pushed by “the hatred of an adulteress, by the whim of a dancer”. John and Jesus suffered humiliating deaths.

Like Jesus, “John too had his Garden of Gethsemane, his anguish in prison, when he questioned whether or not he was wrong”. He “sent his disciples to ask Jesus: Tell me, are you the Messiah or is it someone else and I am wrong?”. What he experienced was the “darkness of the soul”, the “darkness that purifies”. “Jesus responded to John in the same way that the Father responded to Jesus: he comforted him”. Reflecting on this darkness, Pope Francis recalled the witness of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta. She was a woman who was praised all around the world, and even received the Nobel Prize! But she knew that for a long period of her life, there was only darkness within her”. “John too experienced this darkness”, and through “proclaiming Jesus Christ, and not taking advantage of the prophesy”, he become “an imitator of Jesus Christ”.

In John, therefore we see the “image” and “the vocation of a disciple”. The “source of the disciple’s behaviour” can be seen in the Gospel when Mary visits Elizabeth and “John dances for joy in his mother’s womb”. Jesus and John were indeed “cousins” and “perhaps they later found each other”, but that first “encounter filled John’s heart with joy, so much joy. This turned him into a disciple”, a “man who proclaimed Jesus Christ, who did not put himself in Christ’s place, but instead, followed Christ’s path”.

Pope Francis concluded by suggesting that we examine our consciences, focusing “on our discipleship” through some questions: “Do we proclaim Jesus Christ? Do we profit from our

condition as Christians, as if it were a privilege, or not?”. It is important in this regard to look at the example of John who “did not take advantage of the prophecy”.

“Do we choose the path of Jesus Christ, the way of humiliation, of humility, of abasing ourselves at his service?”. The Pope said that if we realize it is not the case, then it is good “to ask ourselves: when was my encounter with Jesus Christ, that encounter that filled me with joy?”. It is a way to spiritually return to that first encounter with the Lord, “to return to the first Galilee encounter: we all have one!”. The secret, the Pope said, is to “go there: encountering the Lord again and to continue down this beautiful path, on which he must increase and we must decrease”.