



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAЕ

The spirit of hypocrisy

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In his homily at Holy Mass, Pope Francis reflected on the readings of the day taken from the Prophet Isaiah (58:1-9a) and from the Gospel of Matthew (9:14-15). Through these two readings, the Pope noted, on the first Friday after Ash Wednesday, the Church meditates on the true meaning of fasting. “The spirit of hypocrisy is lurking behind these readings”, the Pope said, “the spirit of formality in keeping the commandments, in this case, of fasting”. Therefore, “Jesus frequently returns to the issue of hypocrisy many times when he sees that doctors of the Law think themselves to be perfect: they fulfil the commandments as though it were a mere formality”.

Here the Pope observed that they suffered from a kind of memory loss. For “they forgot that they had been chosen together with the People of God, and not on their own. They forgot the history of their people, the history of salvation, of their election, of the Covenant, of the promise”.

In so doing, they continued, “they reduced their history to ethics. Religious life became for them a matter of ethics”. Thus, “theologians say that, in Jesus’ time, there were 300 commandments” to be observed “more or less”. Yet “receiving the love of a father from the Lord, receiving from the Lord an identity as a People and then changing it into an ethical system” means “rejecting the original gift of love”. The hypocrites were “good people, they did what they were supposed to do, they were apparently good”. But “they were ethicists, ethicists without goodness, because they had lost the sense of belonging to a people”.

“The Lord grants salvation within a people, in belonging to a people,” the Pope said. “Thus we understand what the Prophet Isaiah says to us about fasting and penitence: what is the fast which is pleasing to the Lord? The fast that stands in relation with the people, the people to which we belong: the people to which we have been called and in which we have been inserted”.

Pope Francis then reread a portion of the day’s passage from the Book of Isaiah: “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?”.

This, the Pope said, is the true meaning of fasting: “to care about the life of your brother, not to be ashamed of the flesh of your brother, as Isaiah says”. In fact, “our perfection, our sanctity advances with our people, the people with whom we were chosen and inserted”. And “our greatest act of holiness is precisely in the flesh of our brother and the flesh of Jesus Christ”.

Thus, he emphasized, “today’s act of holiness — for us who stand at the altar — is not a hypocritical fasting. It means not being ashamed of the flesh of Christ who comes here today: for this is the mystery of the Body and Blood of Christ. It is going out to share our bread with the hungry, to care for the sick and the elderly, for those who can give us nothing in return: this is what it means not to be ashamed of the flesh”.

“The salvation of God”, the Pontiff repeated, “occurs in a people, a people that advances, a people of brothers and sisters who are not ashamed of one another”. However, this “is the most difficult fast: the fast of goodness. This is where goodness leads us”.

“Perhaps the priest who passed by that wounded man was thinking, recalling the commandments at that time: ‘If I touch his blood, his wounded flesh, I will be made unclean and will not be able to celebrate the Sabbath!’ And he was ashamed of the flesh of that man. This is hypocrisy!”. Yet, he continued, “a sinner passed by and saw him: he saw the flesh of his brother, the flesh of a man of his people, a son of God like himself. And he was not ashamed”.

“What the Church sets before us today” provides us with a true examination of conscience, the Pope said. He therefore proposed that we ask ourselves: “Am I ashamed of the flesh of my brother or sister? When I give alms, do I let the coins fall without touching his hand? And if by chance I touch him, do I do this?” he asked mimicking a gesture of drawing back his hand. He continued: “When I give alms, do I look at my brother or sister in the eyes? When I know a person is sick do I visit him? Do I greet him with tenderness?”

“There is a sign that may help us” to complete this examination of conscience, the Pope said. “A question: do I know how to caress the sick, the elderly, and children? Or have I forgotten what it

means to cherish someone?” Hypocrites have forgotten what it means to cherish and caress someone. Hence the recommendation “not be ashamed of the flesh of our brothers: it is our flesh”. The Pope concluded by observing that “we will be judged by our conduct toward “these brothers and sisters” and certainly not “by a hypocrite’s fast”.