



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

The heart on guard

Friday, 10 October 2014

(by *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly ed. in English, n. 42, 17 October 2014)

Do we guard our heart well? Do we protect it from the demon's constant attempts to enter it and dwell there? These were among the questions asked by Pope Francis during Mass at Santa Marta, reflecting on the day's reading from the Gospel of Luke (11:15-26). It presents "a sad story", he said, which begins with Jesus, who casts out a demon, "and ends with the moment when the demons return to the heart of the person from whom they had been cast out".

It is a recurring situation in the life of every man because, the Pontiff recalled, quoting the passage from Luke: "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a man, he passes through waterless places seeking rest; and finding none he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came'". Here then, is where the demon, finding the heart at peace, "goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than himself, and they enter and dwell there". And thus, "the latter state of that man becomes worse than the former".

The demon in fact, the Bishop of Rome explained, never gets discouraged, "he has patience" and he repeatedly returns, even "at the end of life", because he "doesn't give up what he wants for himself".

Jesus, too, felt this reality: in the Gospel of Luke we read that “after the temptation in the wilderness” the demon left him alone for a while, but then “kept coming back”. And the demons “set traps for him” up until the end, until his passion, “up to the Cross”, telling him, “If you are the Son of God... come, come to us, this way we can believe”. And, Francis explained, what also happens to us when someone tempts us, asking us: “Are you capable?”. And they challenge us maliciously, saying: “No, you aren’t capable”. This is why “Jesus speaks of a strong man, fully armed, the guard of his own palace, who guards his own house”, because the heart of each one of us is like a house. And so, the Pontiff asked himself, “am I the guard of my heart?”.

It is indeed necessary “to protect that treasure where the Holy Spirit dwells, so that the other spirits do not enter”. And it needs to be done “like one protects a house, with lock and key”. After all, the Pope said, we use “many types of security” in our houses to defend against thieves. Do we do the same with our heart? Or do we leave “the door open?”. One must “be vigilant”, Francis advised, because the demon, even though “he has been cast out by baptism, he goes, he finds seven others more evil than himself, and he returns”.

Thus constant attention is necessary. One must always ask oneself: “What is happening there”, inside us? “Am I the sentry of my heart?”. We learn, the Pontiff suggested, from our everyday life: “Who among us, when we are at home, whether in the kitchen, or at our desk, wherever we may be, and seeing a person pass through that we don’t know, who among us remains calm? No one!”. We immediately turn to the stranger: “Who are you? Who let you in? Where did you come in?”. The same thing can also happen inside us. “How many times”, the Bishop of Rome underlined, “do wicked thoughts enter, wicked intentions, jealousy, envy. So many things that enter. But who opened that door? Where did they come in?”. And if we are not aware of whom we let into our heart, it “becomes a town square, where everyone comes and goes”. You begin to lack intimacy. And there, “the Lord cannot speak or even be heard”.

So it happens that, even if our heart “is truly the place to receive the Holy Spirit”, without the proper vigilance “the Spirit ends up in a corner”, as if we have locked him in “a closet”. And there, the Spirit is “sad”.

What do we do then, to prevent this occurrence? To answer, the Pope took another cue from the Gospel. He quoted an expression that Jesus used, “which seems a bit curious: ‘he who does not gather with me scatters’”. Starting from the word “gather”, Francis explained that one needs “to have a gathered heart”, a heart in which we manage to be aware of “what’s happening”. In this sense, what may be recommended is the age old “but good” practice of examining the conscience. “Who among us”, asked the Pontiff, “in the evening, before the day is over, is alone” and in the silence “asks himself” what has happened in my heart today? What has occurred? What things have passed through my heart?”.

It is an important exercise, a complete “grace” that can help us to be good guardians. Because,

the Pope recalled, “the devils come back, always, even at the end of life”. And to keep watch so the demons do not enter our heart, it is essential to know how to “be in silence before one’s self and before God”, in order to check whether someone we don’t know has entered our house, and whether the key is in place”. This, the Pontiff concluded, “helps us to defend ourselves against so much malevolence, also against what we might do ourselves”. Because “these demons are so clever” and are capable of misleading everyone.