



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

Darkness of the heart

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“I ask the Lord for the grace that our heart may be simple, bright with the truth He gives us, and this way we can be kind, forgiving, understanding with others, big-hearted with people, merciful”. This was Pope Francis’ concluding prayer at morning Mass on Monday. “Never condemn”, he said. “If you want to condemn, condemn yourself. Never limp with both legs, as Elijah says, trying to take advantage of situations”. On the contrary, we must ask “the Lord for grace, that He grant us this inner light, that He convince us that He alone is the rock”, and not those things we treat as important. We must ask “that He accompany us on the way, that He expand our heart, in order that we can relate to the problems of many people, and that He grant us the grace to feel ourselves as sinners”.

The source of the Holy Father’s remarks was the day’s Reading from the Gospel according to Matthew (21:23-27), wherein Jesus takes issue with those who look at people’s spontaneous faith with formalism and norms which are often unhelpful. The Pontiff introduced his reflection by recalling that when Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and “the children sang: ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’”, some of the “doctors of the law wanted to silence them”. But Jesus said: “They cannot be silenced; if they don’t cry out, the rocks will cry out!”. The Lord then “healed many people” and when He was hungry, He went to a fig tree that had no fruit, and He cursed it: “May

no one ever eat fruit from you again". Afterwards the tree withered away, and when his disciples noted this miracle, Jesus replied: "If you have faith, you will do the same and more!".

In essence, Francis said, Jesus "preached about faith. Then He returned to the temple, healed many people, many sick, and cast out those who were doing business, selling, changing money". And this is when, witnessing these things, "the chief priests, the doctors of the law took courage and approached Him", asking: "By what authority are you doing these things? We are here and command in the temple". Thus, Jesus answered "with inner zeal, with great acuity", in order to reach "the heart of these people". These were people "who had an insecure heart, a heart which adapted somewhat to circumstances, a heart which, according to the moment, went to one side or the other".

It might be considered "a diplomatic heart", but to the Pontiff this definition is inaccurate, "because diplomacy is a very noble profession, a profession which brings people together, a profession for making peace"; while "these people weren't doing this". Theirs was instead "a hypocritical heart". To them, "the truth didn't matter". They pursued their own interests "according to how the wind was blowing". In other words, "they were weather vanes, all of them". They had "an inconsistent heart, and negotiated everything: inner freedom, faith, homeland. To them what mattered in situations was a good outcome; they were *situationalists*, men who adapted to the trends: 'the wind is coming from there, let's go there'. This was their heart: they took advantage of situations".

What's described in the Gospel scene, Pope Francis explained, is one of these situations where they they tried to take advantage. "They saw a weakness at that moment" or perhaps they imagined it, and decided "this is the time", and thus came the question: "Where is your authority?". Evidently "they felt fairly strong". But once again, Jesus caught them off guard. He "didn't argue with them" but reassured them, saying "yes, yes, I will tell you, but first tell me this", and He asked them about John the Baptist. Thus Jesus answered a question with a question, "and this weakened them" to the point that his interlocutors "didn't know where to turn".

And here Pope Francis linked his discussion to the Collect prayer from the opening of Mass, which asked the Lord to "cast light on the darkness of our hearts". In effect, the people that the Gospel spoke of "had such darkness in their heart". Of course, "they observed the law: on the Sabbath they didn't walk more than 100 metres and they never went to the table without washing their hands and performing ablutions"; they were "very law-abiding, very firm in their ways". However, the Pope urged, "this is true only in appearances. They were strong, but outwardly. They were cast in plaster. The heart was very weak, they didn't know what they believed in. And this is why their life was, the outward portion, completely regulated; but their heart went from one side to the other: a weak heart and flesh of plaster, strong, hard".

Jesus, on the contrary, "teaches us that Christians must have a strong, steadfast heart, which grows upon the rock that is Christ", and which moves with prudence. Indeed, the Pontiff continued,

“you don’t negotiate with the heart, you don’t negotiate with the rock. The rock is Christ, it isn’t negotiated! This is the drama of the hypocrisy of these people. And Jesus never negotiated his heart as the Son of the Father, but He was open with people, looking for ways to help”. The others, rather, said: “You can’t do this; our discipline, our doctrine says that you can’t do this”. And they asked Him: “Why are your disciples eating grain in the field and walking on the Sabbath? You can’t do this”. In other words, “they were rigid in their discipline” and believed: “The discipline is not to be touched, it’s sacred”.

Francis then added a personal recollection, linked to his childhood, “when Pope Pius XII freed us from that very heavy cross of the Eucharistic fast. You couldn’t even drink a drop of water” — not even while brushing your teeth. The Bishop of Rome confided that “as a child, I went to confess that I had taken Communion, because I believed that a drop of water had gone inside”. Therefore, when Pope Pacelli “changed the discipline — ‘Ah, heresy! He touched the discipline of the Church!’ — so many Pharisees were scandalized”. Because Pius XII did what Jesus had done: “he saw the needs of the people: ‘The poor people, with such zeal!’. These priests who were saying three Masses, the last one at one o’clock, after midday, fasting. And these Pharisees were like this — ‘our discipline’ — rigid in the flesh, but as Jesus says, ‘decayed in the heart’, weak until decayed. Darkness in the heart”.

And here lies “the tragedy of these people” whom Jesus denounced: “Hypocrites, you go where the wind blows, to take advantage!”. In fact, they “were always trying to benefit from something”. Pope Francis warned that this can also happen in our life: “Sometimes, when I’ve seen a Christian man or woman like this, with a weak heart, not firm, not steadfast on the rock, and with with so much outward rigidity, I have asked the Lord: throw down a banana peel in front of him, so he takes a good slip, is ashamed of being a sinner and thus encounters You, who are the Saviour”. After all, “so many times a sin can shame us” and allow us to “encounter the Lord, who forgives us”.

“The Bible says: ‘the heart of man is a thing of mystery’”, the Pontiff continued, “who can understand it?”. And this is why, he concluded, we have asked today, “Lord, cast light on the darkness of our hearts; that our hearts may be steadfast in faith”. Just like those of the simple people in the Gospel scene: people who “didn’t make a mistake, because the doctors of the law knew they couldn’t say: ‘No, John’s Baptism doesn’t come from heaven!’, because the people knew, they had that sense of faith, which came from heaven”.