



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

Those who take away the keys

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“One of the hardest things for all of us Christians to understand is the free gift of salvation in Christ”, because there have always been “doctors of the law” who mislead by limiting the love of God to “small horizons”, when instead it is something “immense and boundless”. The matter was first addressed by Jesus himself, then by the Apostle Paul and many other saints throughout history up to the present day. Among these saints was also Teresa of Avila. On the day that the Church celebrates this Carmelite mystic — who was born 500 years ago — Pope Francis spoke of how this woman received from the Lord “the grace of understanding the horizons of love”.

On Thursday morning in the Mass at Santa Marta, the Pope connected the Readings — from the Letter of Paul to the Romans (3:21-30a) and the Gospel of Luke (11:47-54) — to the extraordinary experience lived by St Teresa. She too, he explained, “was judged by the experts of her day. She did not go to prison, but was barely saved, and was sent to another convent where she was supervised”. Moreover, he noted, “this is a fight that persists throughout history”.

The history he referred to was included in both readings. The Pope recalled that both Paul and Jesus seem “a little angry, and annoyed, one might say”. Where did Paul’s malaise come from? Francis said the answer was that the Apostle “defended the doctrine, he was a great defender of

the doctrine, and the annoyance came from these people who did not tolerate the doctrine". Which doctrine? "The gratuitousness of salvation". Pope Francis said that God "saved us gratuitously, and he saved all of us". While there were groups who said: "No, he saves only that person, that man, that woman who does this, this, this and this ... who performs these acts, who observes these commandments". In this way, "that which is free, the love of God, according to these people whom Paul is speaking against", ends up becoming "something we can obtain: 'If I do this, God is obliged to give me salvation'. This is what Paul refers to as 'salvation by works'".

This is why the gratuitousness of salvation in Christ is so difficult to understand. The Pope continued, saying that "we are used to hearing that Jesus is the Son of God, that he came out of love to save us and that he died for us. But we have heard it so many times that we have become accustomed to it". When, in fact, "we enter into this mystery of God, of his love, this boundless love, this immense love", we are left so "astonished" that "perhaps we prefer not to understand it: we believe that the style of salvation in which 'we do certain things and then we are saved' is better". "Of course", the Pope explained, "to do good, to do the things that Jesus tells us to do, is good and should be done"; but "the essence of salvation does not come from this. This is my response to the salvation that is free, that comes gratuitously from the love of God".

This is why Jesus himself may seem "a little bitter against the doctors of the law", to whom he "says strong and very harsh things: 'you have taken away the key of knowledge, you did not enter, and you have hindered those who were entering, because you have taken away the key', that is, the key of free salvation, of that knowledge". In fact, the Pope remarked, these doctors of the law thought that you could only be saved by "observing all of the commandments", while "those who did not do so were condemned". In practice, Pope Francis said, with an evocative image, "they shortened the horizons of God as if the love of God were small, small, small, small, to the size of each one of us".

This, Pope explained, was "the struggle that both Jesus and Paul faced in order to defend the doctrine". To those who might object and ask: "But father, are there not commandments?", Francis replied: "Yes, there are! But there is one that Jesus says is basically a synthesis of all the commandments: love God and love thy neighbour". Thanks to "this attitude of love, we are worthy of the gratuity of salvation, because love is free". For example: "If I say: 'Ah, I love you!', But I have other interests behind that, it is not love, it is interest. This is why Jesus says: 'The greatest love is this: to love God with your whole life, with all your heart, with all your strength, and your neighbour as yourself'. Because it is the only commandment that is worthy of God's free salvation". At which point Jesus adds: "In this commandment are all the others, because it summons — it creates all that is good — all the others'. The source is love; the horizon is love. If you have closed the door and have taken away the key of love, you are not worthy of the free salvation you have received".

It is a history that repeats itself. "How many saints", the Pope said, "have been persecuted for defending love, the gratuitousness of salvation, the doctrine. So many saints. Let us think of Joan

of Arc". The "struggle to control salvation — only those who do these things are saved — did not end with Jesus and Paul". Nor does it end with us. In fact it is a struggle that we carry within us as well. The Pope offered advice, saying: "It can be good for us to ask ourselves today: Do I believe that the Lord saved me freely? Do I believe that I do not deserve salvation? And if I do merit something do I believe it is through Jesus Christ and what he has done for me? It is a good question: Do I believe in the gratuitousness of salvation? And finally, do I believe that the only answer is love, the commandment of love, which Jesus says summarizes all the law and the teachings of all the prophets?". In this way the Pope made the invitation to renew "these questions today. Only in this way can we be faithful to this love that is so merciful: the love of a father and of a mother, because God says that he is like a mother to us; love, great horizons, boundless, without limitations. Let us not be fooled by the experts who put limitations on this love.