



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAЕ

Osteoporosis of the soul

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Vanity, along with greed and pride, is one of the “roots of all evil” in the heart of every person. The frantic pursuit, so typical of our times, “to pretend and appear” to be a certain way, does not lead to anything, “it does not bring us any true gain” and leaves the soul restless.

The *vanitas vanitatum* from the Book of Ecclesiastes (1:2-11), proposed in the liturgy of the day, was the focus of Pope Francis’ homily in the Mass he celebrated at Santa Marta on Thursday morning, 22 September. The first point he focused on, however, was the anxiety experienced by King Herod, described in the Gospel of Luke (9:7-9). Indeed, the sovereign “was troubled” because this Jesus whom everyone was speaking of, “was a threat to him”. Some thought it was John, but the king repeated: “John I beheaded; so who is this about whom I hear such things?”. He was restless, the Pope noted, recalling that Herod’s father, Herod the Great, had also been “seized with fright” when the wise men came to worship Jesus.

In our soul, the Pope explained, “it’s possible to experience two types of restlessness: the good one, which is the restlessness of the Holy Spirit, which the Holy Spirit gives us, and unsettles the soul in order to do good things, to move forward; and there is also the bad type of restlessness, the one that is born of a guilty conscience”. The latter is what characterized the two contemporary

rulers of Jesus' time: "they had a guilty conscience, and that is why they were restless, because they had done bad things and did not have peace, and every event seemed to threaten them". Moreover, their way of solving problems was to kill people, and they advanced this way, by stepping "over people's corpses".

Those who, like them, said Francis, "do harm", have "a guilty conscience and cannot live in peace": the restlessness torments them and they live "with a constant itch, a rash that does not leave them at peace". The Pope centred his reflection on this interior situation: "these people have done evil, but evil, any evil, always has the same root: greed, vanity and pride". All three, he added, "leave you without peace of conscience", all three prevent you from entering "the *healthy restlessness* of the Holy Spirit", and "cause you to live with restlessness, with fear".

At this point, prompted by the First Reading, the Pope focused on vanity: "Vanity of vanities ... vanity of vanities! All is vanity". The expression from the Book of Ecclesiastes, he noted, might appear "a bit pessimistic", even if in reality "not everything is like this: there are good people". However, Francis explained, "the text is meant to underline this temptation", which "was also the first" experienced by "our forefathers: to be like God". Vanity "makes us bloat us", but "it does not last long, as it is like a bubble", and never brings "any true gain". Yet, man "is anxious to appear" a certain way, "to pretend, and to resemble". To put it simply: "Vanity is putting makeup on one's life. And this renders the soul sick, because one puts makeup on his life in order to appear and to seem" a certain way, "and all of the things that he does are to pretend, out of vanity, and in the end what does he gain?".

To better understand this interior reality, the Pope used a few concrete images: "vanity is like 'osteoporosis' of the soul: the bones look good from the outside, but on the inside they are ruined". Furthermore: "Vanity leads us to fraud; as con artists mark cards in order to gain. This victory is false, it is not real. This is vanity: living to pretend, living to resemble, living to appear. And this unsettles the soul".

In this regard, the Pope said, St Bernard addressed those who are vain with a word "all too strong": "But think about what you will become. You will be food for worms". As if to say: "putting makeup on your life is a lie, because the worms will devour you and you will be nothing". However, "where does the power of vanity lie?", Francis asked. "Driven by pride, toward evil", man does not want "his mistake to be seen", and tends to "cover everything". It is true that there are many "holy people"; but it is equally true that there are people about whom you think: "What a good person! He goes to Mass every Sunday. He gives large offerings to the Church", while being unaware of the "osteoporosis", of the "corruption he has within". Moreover, "vanity is this: it makes you look as though you have a saintly face, while the truth about you within is quite different".

Faced with this, the Pope concluded, "where is our strength, our security and refuge?". The answer is also offered in the liturgy. In the Responsorial Psalm of the day, in fact, we hear: "Lord,

you have been our refuge from generation to generation". In the Gospel acclamation we recall Jesus' words: "I am the way, the truth and the life". This "is the truth", Francis said, "not the makeup of vanity".

Therefore it is important to pray "that the Lord will deliver us from these three roots of all evil: greed, vanity and pride. But especially from vanity, which does us so much harm".