



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

Doctrine and ideology

Friday, 19 May 2017

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“For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...”: these words contained in the beginning of the Letter which the Apostles wrote to the Christians “of Antioch, Syria and Cilicia” have lost nothing of their timeliness. The words were recorded after the disciples had discussed various matters amongst themselves, which resulted in the very first ‘Council’ in the history of the Church. With precisely these words relayed to us in the Acts of the Apostles, Pope Francis began his meditation by asking for “the grace of a mature obedience to the Magisterium of the Church”, of being faithful “to Peter, to the bishops” and “to the Holy Spirit who guides and supports this process”. Celebrating Mass at Santa Marta on Friday morning, 19 May, the Pope also warned against “transforming doctrine into ideology”, thus creating difficulty and divisions.

“There have been difficulties in the Church from the beginning”, Pope Francis began. So many difficulties that “in the first Christian community, for example, there were jealousies and power struggles: a few shrewd ones who wanted to earn or buy power, like Simon or that hypocritical couple Ananias and Sapphira, who wanted to be seen as true Christians but who were carrying out their business affairs under the table”. Thus, the Pope affirmed, “there have always been problems: we are human; we are sinners and there are difficulties, even in the Church, amongst ourselves, always”. And “in a certain sense”, he pointed out, “being sinners causes us to be

humble and to approach the Lord as Saviour from our sins". For this reason "it is a grace to feel like sinners, a grace".

"But there are other, bigger problems, not those of every day", the Holy Father continued, making reference to the passage from the Acts of the Apostles (15:22-31) offered by the day's first reading. The issue "in this verse is the result of a problem that begins with Peter: when Peter goes to Cornelius, a pagan, and he baptizes Cornelius". And "here, history focuses on the same question: Paul and Barnabas had suffered a lot there in Antioch, because what Jesus had said is true: 'other peoples will come'; it is true, but what was not said was how these people might enter the Church". As a result, the Pope affirmed, "some were saying: 'no, first they must become Jews and then enter'. This was the core of the issue".

By way of clarification, Pope Francis explained that "on one side", there were "those who wanted them to become Jews first and then be baptized". And "on the other side", however, there were "those who thought: 'no, is it not the Lord who is calling? Let them come'". Observe then, that "when Peter explains this, the vision which he had received, and then when he sees that the Holy Spirit descends upon Cornelius and his family, he says this phrase: 'who am I to close the door to the Holy Spirit?'. All this, Pope Francis recalled, "also happened at Antioch: then Paul was stoned and left for dead". They were "persecuted".

In fact, the Pope added, there is "this little group" that vacillates "from one side to the other with disparagement, with ugly and grievous gossip". And "it also says, in a passage a little further on — but it is the same story at Antioch — that they went to see some of the pious women who had influence on the leaders, that they might send the Apostles away". Thus, "the Apostles came together in the end to study this problem: what do we do with the pagans, those who want to become Christians, those whom the Holy Spirit has called to become Christians?". And the Apostles "wanted to deal with the matter in the presence of God: most probably, in this gathering, there were animated discussions but in good spirit". Even "Paul, says the Acts of the Apostles in another place, had strong words for Peter, but always before God, in good spirit". Instead, "there is another group which was creating confusion, and the Apostles say this: 'We have come to know that some of us, to whom we had not given any official title — leaders — have come to trouble you with discussions that have unsettled your minds'".

"And so we find ourselves facing two groups of people", the Pope continued: "the group of the Apostles who want to discuss the problem and the others who go creating problems; they divide, divide the Church. They say that what the Apostles were preaching was not what Jesus had said, that it was not the truth". Thus, we see that "the Apostles discussed this very thing and in the end, as we heard, they come to an agreement". But, the Pope pointed out, "it is not a political agreement; it is the inspiration of the Holy Spirit which leads them to say: no further matters, no demands", other than the obligations to: "abstain from eating meat during that time, meat sacrificed to idols because this would be communing with idols; abstain from blood, and from strangled animals — because it was a scandal to eat blood, strangled animals, even if this is a consideration which today appears secondary — and from unlawful unions". And another

consideration was “the freedom of the Spirit: thus pagans could directly enter the Church without being circumcised”.

The Pope also noted that “the beginning of this Letter is nice”. The Apostles said: “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us”, meaning that the Apostles and the Spirit “are in agreement”. And “this is the first Council of the Church: to clarify doctrine”. Since then, there “have been many others, up until Vatican ii, which clarified doctrine: for example when we recite the Creed, it is the result of Councils which clarified doctrine”. In fact, the Pope affirmed, “it is a duty of the Church to clarify doctrine so that what Jesus said in the Gospels, which is the spirit of the Gospels, can be understood well”. And the Acts of the Apostles record the first Council: “faced with a problem, they clarified; things are to be just so”. Also “at Ephesus, for example, when they discussed whether Mary is the Mother of God, they held the Council to clarify the issue, so that the Holy Spirit and they, the Pope and the bishops, all together, could continue on”.

“But there have always been those people”, Pope Francis warned, “who, without any official title, go about disturbing the Christian community with discourses which unsettle souls: ‘Ah, no, what he said is heretical; that cannot be said, not that, the doctrine of the Church is this’”. In reality, “they are fanatics about things which are not clear, like those fanatics who went about sowing weeds to divide the Christian community”. So, “this is the problem: when the doctrine of the Church, which comes from the Gospel, which the Holy Spirit inspires — because Jesus said ‘He will teach you and will help you to recall all that which I have taught’ — becomes ideology”. Thus, we see “the great error of these people: those who were going there were not believers; they were ‘ideologized’; they had an ideology which closed their heart to the work of the Holy Spirit”. On the other hand, “the Apostles had animated discussions, but they weren’t ideologized: their heart was open to what the Spirit was saying”. This is why, “after discussion”, they begin their letter by writing: “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us”.

“We mustn’t be surprised when we hear these opinions on the ideologies of doctrine”, the Pope stated. “The Church has her own magisterium, the Magisterium of the Pope, of the Bishops, of the Councils and we ought to follow on that way which comes from the preaching of Jesus and from the teaching and the assistance of the Holy Spirit: it is always open, always free”. And “this is the freedom of the Spirit, but in the doctrine”. Instead, those “who went there, to Antioch, to create havoc and to divide the community, are ideologues”. Because “doctrine unites; the Councils always unite the Christian community”. And ideology “divides”, but “for them ideology is more important than doctrine: they leave the Holy Spirit to the side”.

“Today I am inspired to ask for the grace of mature obedience to the Magisterium of the Church”, Pope Francis said, “the obedience to what the Church has always taught and continues to teach us”. With this obedience, one “develops the Gospel; explains it better each time, in fidelity to Peter, to the bishops and, ultimately, to the Holy Spirit who guides and sustains this process”. To this end, the Pope invited the faithful “to also pray for those who transform doctrine into ideology, so

that the Lord may give them the grace of conversion to the unity of the Church, to the Holy Spirit, and to true doctrine”.