



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAЕ

A friend to pray with

Thursday, 3 April 2014

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In his homily at Holy Mass, Pope Francis reflected on the nature of prayer. The Pope based his reflection, and the little “manual” of prayer he proposed, on the day’s first Reading from Exodus (32:7-14), which recounts “Moses’ prayer for his people who had fallen into the grave sin of idolatry”.

The Pope introduced his remarks by noting that God reproved Moses, saying to him: “Go down; for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves”.

It is as though God wished to distance himself through their dialogue, saying: “I have nothing to do with this people; they are yours, they are no longer mine”. But Moses responds: “O Lord, why does thy wrath burn hot against thy people, whom thou has brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?”. The Pope observed: “the people stood as it were between two masters, between two fathers: the people of God and the people of Moses”.

Moses begins to plead with God in a prayer which Pope Francis described as “a true battle with God”. It was “the leader’s battle ... to save his people, who were the people of God”. Moses “speaks freely before the Lord” and in doing so “he teaches us how to pray: without fear, freely, even with insistence”. Moses “insists, he is courageous: this is how prayer must be!”

Saying words and nothing more is not prayer, the Pope continued. One has to know how to “‘negotiate’ with God, as Moses did, by reminding God through argumentation of his relationship with his people”. Moses “seeks to ‘convince’ God” that if he were to unleash his wrath against his people, he would disgrace himself before all the Egyptians”. In the Book of Exodus, in fact, we hear Moses say to God: “Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did he bring them forth, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn away from thy fierce wrath and repent of this evil against thy people’”.

Essentially, the Pope said, Moses “seeks to ‘convince’ God to change his mind by means of many arguments. And he looks to his memory for those arguments. Thus, “he says to God: you have done this, this and this for your people, but if now you let them die in the desert what will your enemies say?” They will say — he went on — “that you are evil, that are not faithful”. Moses thus “seeks to ‘convince’ the Lord” by engaging in a “battle” that places two elements at the centre: “your people and my people”.

Moses’ prayer is a success. “In the end Moses succeeds in ‘convincing’ the Lord”. The Pope remarked: “the ending of this passage is beautiful: ‘the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people’”. Certainly, he said, “the Lord was a bit weary of this unfaithful people”; however, “in the final words of the passage one reads that the Lord repented” and “changed his stance” yet one must ask oneself: who truly changed here? Did the Lord change? “I believe not”, the Pope said. It was Moses who changed, because he believed that the Lord would have destroyed his people. And “he probes his memory to discover how good the Lord was with his people, how he had delivered them from slavery in Egypt in order to lead them forward with a promise”.

“These are the arguments he employs to ‘convince’ the Lord”. In the process, he rediscovers the memory of his people and also discovers the mercy of God. “Moses feared that God would do do this [terrible] thing”, and yet “in the end he goes down the mountain” with a great awareness in his heart: “our God is merciful, he is able to forgive, he turns back on his decisions, he is a father!”.

These were all things which Moses already knew, “but he knew them more or less obscurely. It is in prayer that he truly discovers them”. This is what prayer does in us, Pope Francis explained. “It changes our hearts, it makes us understand better who our God truly is”. However, he added that “it is important not to speak to God with empty words like the pagans”. Instead, we need to tell him the truth: “but look, Lord, I have this problem in my family, with my son, with this or that.... What is to be done? You can’t leave me like this!”

Sometimes prayer takes risks. In fact, the Pope explained, “praying is also ‘negotiating’ with God to obtain what I ask of the Lord.... The Bible says that Moses spoke to the Lord face to face, like a friend, and this is how prayer must be: free, insistent, with arguments, [even] ‘reproving’ the Lord a little: ‘but you promised me this and you didn’t do it!’”. Prayer, the Pontiff said, is like “speaking

with a friend: in prayer one opens one's heart".

Pope Francis then recalled that, following his face to face with God, "Moses went down the mountain reinvigorated, saying" 'I got to know the Lord better'. And that strength allowed him to resume his work of leading the people to the Promised Land". For "prayer reinvigorates".

The Pope prayed that the Lord "might give us all grace, for prayer is a grace". He then invited those present to always remember that "when we pray to God, it is not a dialogue between two ... for the Holy Spirit is always present in every prayer". Indeed, he said, "we cannot pray without the Holy Spirit: it is he who prays in us, who changes our hearts, it is he who teaches us to call God 'Father'".

Lastly, Pope Francis exhorted those present to ask the Holy Spirit to teach them to pray "as Moses prayed, to 'negotiate' with God in freedom of spirit and with courage". The Pope concluded: "May the Holy Spirit, who is always present in our prayer, lead us along this path".