



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAЕ

Hardened hearts

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A hardened heart is unable to comprehend even the greatest miracles. But “how does a heart become hardened?”, Pope Francis asked during Mass at Santa Marta on Friday morning.

In the passage of the Gospel according to Mark (6:45-52), we read that the disciples “did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened”. Yet, Francis explained, “they were the Apostles, the ones closest to Jesus. But they didn’t understand”. Even witnessing the miracle, even having “seen that those people — more than 5,000 — had eaten of five loaves”, they didn’t comprehend. “Why? Because their hearts were hardened”.

The Pope said that many times in the Gospel, Jesus “speaks of hardness of the heart”, He rebukes “the stiff-necked people”, He weeps over Jerusalem, “which doesn’t understand who He is”. The Lord is faced with this hardness: it is “such work” for Jesus “to make this heart more docile, to remove the hardness, to make it loving”, Francis continued. And this work continues after the Resurrection, with the disciples of Emmaus and many others.

However, the Pontiff asked, “how does a heart become hardened? How is it possible that these people, who were always with Jesus, every day, who heard Him, saw Him... their hearts hardened. But how can a heart become like this?”. The Pope recounted: “Yesterday, I asked my secretary:

Tell me, how does a heart become hardened? He helped me think a bit about this". Francis went on to indicate a series of circumstances that each person might face in his or her own personal experience.

First of all, Francis said, the heart "becomes hardened through painful experiences, through harsh experiences". This is the situation of those who "have lived a very painful experience and don't want to begin another adventure". This is just what happened to the disciples of Emmaus after the Resurrection, and the Pontiff set the scene: "'There is too much, too much commotion, so let's get away from here, because...'. — Because what? — 'Eh, we were hoping this would be the Messiah, He wasn't there, I don't want to delude myself again, I don't want to create illusions!'".

This is a heart hardened by a "painful experience". The same thing happened to Thomas: "No, no, I don't believe it. Unless I place my finger there, I won't believe it". The disciples' hearts were hard "because they had suffered". And in this regard, Francis recalled a popular Argentine saying: "One who burns himself with milk will cry when he sees a cow". In other words, he explained, "that painful experience keeps us from opening our heart".

Another reason the heart becomes hardened is "becoming closed inside oneself: making a world within oneself". This happens when man is "closed inside himself, in his community or in his parish". It is a closing off which "can turn round many things": such as "pride, sufficiency, thinking that I'm better than others", or even "vanity". The Pope indicated: "There are 'mirror' men and women, who are closed within themselves to watch themselves, constantly"; they could be defined as "religious narcissists". They "have hard hearts because they are closed, they aren't open. And they try to protect themselves with these walls they build around themselves".

There is yet another reason that the heart becomes hardened: insecurity. It is experienced by those who think: "I don't feel secure and I am trying to hang on to something to be secure". This attitude is typical of people "who really stick to the letter of the law". This happens, the Pontiff explained, "with the Pharisees, with the Sadducees, with the doctors of the law in the time of Jesus". They would have objected: "But the law says this, it says this up to here...", and thus "they would make another commandment"; in the end, "the poor souls, they were leaning on 300-400 commandments and they felt secure".

In reality, Francis pointed out, all of them "were secure people, but as a man or woman in a prison cell is secure behind the bars: it's a security without freedom". However, it is actually freedom that "Jesus came to bring us". St Paul, for example, rebukes James and Peter "because they do not accept the freedom that Jesus has brought us".

Hence the response to the initial question: "How does a heart become hardened?". The heart in fact, "when it hardens, is not free and if it isn't free it's because it does not love". This concept is expressed in the day's First Reading (1 Jn 4:11-18), in which the Apostle John speaks of "perfect

love” which “casts out fear”. Indeed, ““there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love.’ He isn’t free. He always fears that something painful or sad might happen”, which could cause us to “go the wrong way in life or to risk eternal salvation”. Instead, this is only imagined, simply because that heart doesn’t love. The disciples’ hearts, the Pope explained, “were hardened because they still hadn’t learned how to love”.

Thus, here, we can ask: “Who teaches us how to love? Who frees us from this hardness?”. The Pope’s answer: “the Holy Spirit alone” can do so. “You can take a thousand courses in catechesis, a thousand courses in spirituality, a thousand courses in yoga, Zen and all these things. But all of this will never be able to give you the freedom of the Son”. Only the Holy Spirit “moves your heart to say ‘Father’”; He alone “is capable of casting out, of breaking this hardness of the heart” and of making it “docile to the Lord. Docile to the freedom of love”. It is no coincidence that the disciples’ hearts were “hardened until the day of the Ascension”, when they said to the Lord: “Now the revolution will happen and the Kingdom will come!”. However, “they didn’t understand a thing”. In reality, “only when the Holy Spirit came, did things change”.

Therefore, the Pontiff concluded, “let us ask the Lord for the grace to have a docile heart: that He save us from the slavery of a hardened heart” and “lead us to that beautiful freedom of perfect love, the freedom of the children of God, which the Holy Spirit alone can give”.