



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAЕ

The great one's darkest hour

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On Friday during Mass at Santa Marta, Pope Francis spoke about John the Baptist: the man and the way. The way that John indicated was that of Jesus, to which we too are all called at the moment of truth.

The Pope began his reflection speaking about “the great John” who, according to Jesus, was “the greatest man born of woman”. The day’s passage from Mark’s Gospel (6:14-29) speaks about the imprisonment and martyrdom of John, who was a “man faithful to his mission; a man who suffered many temptations” and “never, ever betrayed his vocation”. He was a faithful man “of great authority, respected by everyone: the great one of that time”.

Then Pope Francis paused to analyze the character of John the Baptist: “What came out of his mouth was just. His heart was just”. He was so great that “Jesus would say that ‘Elijah returned to clean house, to prepare the way’”. And John “was aware that his duty was simply to proclaim: to proclaim the coming of the Messiah. He was aware”, reflecting on what St Augustine said, “that he was only the voice, the Word was another”. And when “he was tempted to ‘steal’ this truth, he remained just: ‘It is not me, He is coming after me: I am the servant; I am the manservant; I am the

one who opens the doors, in order that He may come”.

The Pontiff thus introduced the concept of ‘the way’, because, he recalled: “John is the forerunner: the forerunner not only of the Lord’s entry into public life, but of the entire life of the Lord”. The Baptist “goes forth on the Lord’s path; bears witness of the Lord not only by indicating — ‘He is the one!’ — but also leading life to the end as the Lord did”. Through his martyrdom, he became the “forerunner of the life and death of Jesus Christ”.

The Pope continued to reflect on these parallel paths along which “the great one” suffers “so many trials and becomes small, so very small until scorned”. John, like Jesus, “abases himself, he knows the way of abasement. John with all that authority, thinking of his life, comparing it with that of Jesus, tells the people who He is, how His life will be: ‘It is fitting that He grow, however I must become small’. And this, the Pope underscored, is “John’s life: to become small before Christ, so that Christ may grow”. It is “the life of the servant who makes room, makes way for the Lord to come”.

John’s life “was not easy”. Indeed, “when Jesus began his public life”, he was “close to the Essenes, that is to the observers of the law, but also of prayers, of penance”. Thus, at a certain point, during the period that John was incarcerated, “he suffered the trial of darkness, of his soul’s darkest hour”. And that scene, Francis commented, “is moving: the great one, the greatest one sent two disciples to Jesus, to ask Him: ‘John asks you: Are you He who is to come or shall we look for another?’”. Thus, along John’s path appeared “the darkness of mistake, the darkness of life burnt out in error. And for him, this was a cross”.

To John’s question “Jesus responds with the words of Isaiah”. The Baptist “understands, but his heart remains in darkness”. Nevertheless, John agrees to the requests of the king “who enjoys listening to him, and who enjoys an adulterous life”. John “almost becomes a preacher of the court, of this confused king”. But “he humiliated himself” because he “thought to convert this man”.

In the end, the Pope said, “after this purification, after this continuous descent into annihilation, leading to the annihilation of Jesus, his life ends”. That confused king “is able to make a decision, but not because his heart is converted”; but rather “because wine gives him courage”.

And thus John’s life is ended “under the authority of a mediocre, drunken and corrupt king, because of a dancer’s whim and because of the vindictive hatred of an adulterous woman”. Thus “the great one meets his end, the greatest man born of woman”, Francis stated. He then shared: “When I read this passage, I am moved”. And he added a thought, useful for the spiritual life of every Christian: “I think about two things: first, I think about our martyrs, today’s martyrs, those men, women, children who are persecuted, hated, driven from their homes, tortured, massacred”. And this, he underlined, “is not a thing of the past: this is happening today. Our martyrs meet their end under the authority of corrupt people who hate Jesus Christ”. For this

reason, “it will do us good to think about our martyrs. Today we think of Paul Miki, but that happened in 1600. Let us think of those of today, of 2015”.

The Pontiff continued, indicating that this passage also urges us to reflect on our own life: “I too will meet my end. We all will. No one can ‘buy’ life. We too, willingly or unwillingly, are travelling the road of life’s existential annihilation”. And this, he said, impels us “to pray that this annihilation may resemble as much as possible that of Jesus Christ, his annihilation”.

Francis’ meditation thus came full circle: “John, the great one, who diminishes endlessly into nothingness; the martyrs, who are diminishing today, in our Church today, into nothingness; and we, who are on this road and heading towards the ground, where we will all end up”. And thus the Pope’s final prayer: “May the Lord illuminate us, enable us to understand this way of John, the forerunner of Jesus; the way of Jesus who teaches us how ours has to be”.