



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

Shame and mercy

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Feeling shame and blaming oneself, instead of assigning fault to others, judging and condemning them. This is the first step on the path of Christian life which leads us to ask the Lord for the gift of mercy. The Pope suggested this examination of conscience at Mass in the chapel of Casa Santa Marta on Monday morning.

Francis began his reflection from the day's First Reading from the Book of Daniel (9:4-10). He explained that the People of God "ask for forgiveness, but not a forgiveness with words: this request for forgiveness is for a forgiveness that comes from the heart because the people feel they are sinners". The people "do not feel they are sinners in theory — because all of us can say 'we are all sinners', it's true, it's the truth: everyone here! — but before the Lord they tell of the bad things they have done and the good things they have not done". Indeed, the Scripture reads: "We have sinned, been wicked and done evil; we have rebelled and departed from your commandments and your laws. We have not obeyed your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, our fathers, and all the people of the land".

In substance, Francis noted, in the words of the people there is a "description of all the evil they

have done". Thus, "the People of God, in this moment, blame themselves". They do not criticize "those who persecute us", or their enemies. Instead they look at themselves and say: "I blame myself before you, Lord, and I am ashamed". Such clear words also appear in the passage from Daniel: "O Lord, we are shamefaced".

The Pope indicated that this passage "makes us reflect on a Christian virtue, indeed more than one virtue". In fact "the capacity to blame oneself, self-blame" is "the first step to walking as a Christian". However, "we are all masters, we are all experts" when it comes to "justifying ourselves". We use expressions such as: "It wasn't me; no, it isn't my fault; yes, but not very much.... That's not how things are...".

In short, Francis said, "we all have an alibi" to justify "our shortcomings, our sins". What's more, he added, we so often respond with an "'I don't know!' face", or with an "'I didn't do it, it must have been someone else!' face". In other words, we are always ready to "play innocent". The Pope warned, however, that like this, "we don't go forward in the Christian life".

Thus, he reiterated, the capacity for self-blame is "the first step". Surely it is good to do so in confession with a priest. However, Francis asked, "before and after confession, in your life, in your prayer, are you able to blame yourself? Or is it easier to blame others?".

This experience, the Bishop of Rome pointed out, gives rise to something a bit odd but which, in the end, gives us peace and health". Indeed, "when we begin to look at what we are capable of, we feel bad, we feel disgust", and we ask ourselves: "Am I capable of doing this?". For example, "when I find envy in my heart and I know this envy is capable of speaking ill of another and morally killing him", I have to ask myself: "Am I capable of it? Yes, I am capable!". This is precisely "how this knowledge begins, this wisdom to blame oneself".

Therefore, Francis said, "if we do not learn this first step of life, we will never make progress on the path of Christian life, of spiritual life". This is because "the first step" is "blaming oneself", even if unsaid and kept between "my conscience and me".

To illustrate, the Pope gave a practical example. When we pass by a prison, he said, we might think that the inmates "deserve it". But, he asked: "do you know that were it not for the grace of God, you would be there? Have you thought that you too are capable of doing the things that they did, even worse?". This "is to blame ourselves, not to hide from ourselves the roots of sin that are in us, the many things we are capable of doing, even if they aren't visible".

This attitude, Francis continued, "leads us to feel shame before God, and this is a virtue: shame before God". In order to feel ashamed, we must say: "Look, Lord, I am disgusted with myself, but You are great: to me belongs shame, to you — and I ask for it — mercy". Just as the Scripture says: "O Lord, we are shamefaced, for having sinned against you". We can also say, "because we

are capable of sinning and of doing so many bad things: “But yours, O Lord, our God, are compassion and forgiveness! Shame is mine, and mercy and forgiveness are yours”. It is a “dialogue with the Lord” that will “do us good during this Lenten season: self-blame”.

“Let us ask for mercy”, the Pope said then, referring to the day’s Gospel Reading from Luke (6:36-38). Jesus “is clear: be merciful as your Father is merciful”. After all, Francis explained, “when one learns to blame himself he is merciful with others”. And he is able to say: “Who am I to judge him, if I am capable of doing worse things?”. This is an important phrase: “Who am I to judge another?”. This is understood in the light of Jesus’ words: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful”, and with his call “not to judge”. Instead, the Pontiff recognized, “how we like to judge others, to speak ill of them!”. Yet the Lord is clear: “Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven”. It is certainly not an easy road, which “begins with blaming oneself, it begins from that shame before God and from asking forgiveness from Him: ask forgiveness”. Precisely “from that first step we arrive at what the Lord asks us: to be merciful, to judge no one, to condemn no one, to be generous with others”.

From this perspective, the Pope prayed that “the Lord, in this Lenten season, give us the grace to learn to blame ourselves, each in his solitude”, asking ourselves: “Am I capable of doing this? Am I capable of doing this, with this attitude? With this feeling that I have inside, am I capable of doing worse things?”. He also invited this prayer: “Have compassion for me, Lord, help me to feel shame and give me mercy, so that I may be merciful with others”.