



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAЕ

When the Lord exaggerates

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Pope Francis continued his reflections on the theme of conversion, following the Liturgy of the Word. After his call on Monday to blame ourselves, to be truthful with ourselves, and not pretend to be “better than we really are”, during Mass at Santa Marta on Tuesday morning, the Pontiff expanded on “the message of the Church” which “today can be summarized in three words: the invitation, the gift, and the pretence”. From the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (1:10, 16-20), the invitation is to conversion: “Give ear to the teaching of our God.... Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean”! In other words: “Whatever you have inside that isn’t good, that which is evil, that which is unclean, must be purified”.

In response to the prophet’s entreaties: “remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good”, some might say “but Lord, I don’t do evil; I go to Mass every Sunday, I’m a good Christian, I make many offerings”. Francis would ask them: “Have you gone into your heart? Are you able to blame yourself for the things you find there?”. And when one realizes the need for conversion, one could ask himself: “How can I convert?”. The answer comes from Scripture: “Learn to do good”.

“Uncleanliness of heart”, the Pope said, “is not removed like one removes a stain: we go to the dry cleaner’s and come out clean. It is removed by doing”. Conversion means “taking a different path, a path other than that of evil”. He asked another question: “How do I do good?”. The response again comes from the Prophet Isaiah: “seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow”. These instructions, Francis explained, were easily understood in Israel, where “the poorest and the neediest were orphans and widows”. For each of us this means going to “where the wounds of humanity are, where there is so much pain; and like this, by doing good, you will cleanse your heart, you will be purified! This is the invitation of the Lord”.

Conversion means that we are called to do good for “the neediest: the widow, the orphan, the sick, the elderly”, those who are “abandoned, whom no one remembers”; but also “the children who cannot go to school” or children “who don’t know how to make the sign of the cross”. Because, the Pontiff pointed out, “in a Catholic city, in a Catholic family there are children who don’t know how to pray, who don’t know how to make the sign of the Cross”. Thus it is important “to go to them”, to bring “the love of the Lord”.

If we do this, the Pope asked, “what will the Lord’s gift be?”. He “will change us”, Francis said, referring to what the Prophet Isaiah stated: “though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool”. Even in the face of our fear or hesitation — “But Father, I have so many sins! I have committed so very, very many!” — the Lord confirms: “If you take this path, the one to which I invite you, even if your sins are like scarlet, they will become as white as snow”.

The Pontiff noted: “It’s an exaggeration! The Lord exaggerates; but it’s the truth”, because God, seeing our conversion, “gives us the gift of his forgiveness” and “forgives generously”. God does not say: “I’ll forgive you up to here, then we’ll see the rest...”. On the contrary, “the Lord always forgives everything, everything”. However, Francis emphasized, “if you want to be forgiven” you have to set out on the “path of doing good”.

After analysing the first two words proposed at the start of the homily — first, the “invitation”, in other words: setting out on the journey to convert, to do good; and second, the “gift”, namely: “I’ll give you the greatest forgiveness, I will change you, I will make you completely pure” — the Pope moved on to the third word: “pretence”. Re-reading the passage from the Gospel according to Matthew (23:1-12) in which Jesus is speaking about the scribes and the Pharisees, Francis indicated that as sinners “we are all clever, and always find a path that isn’t the right one, in order to seem more just than we are: it’s the path of hypocrisy”.

Jesus speaks of this very thing in the passage from the day’s Liturgy. He “speaks of those men who like to boast about being right: the Pharisees, the doctors of the law, who say the right things, but who do the opposite”. These “clever ones”, the Pontiff explained, find “vanity, pride, power, money” pleasing. They are “hypocrites” because they “pretend to convert, but their heart is false:

they are liars". Indeed, "their heart does not belong to the Lord; it belongs to the father of all lies, Satan. And this is the 'pretence' of holiness".

Jesus always spoke very clearly against this attitude. In fact, Jesus preferred sinners "a thousand times" over hypocrites. This, according to Francis, was because at least "sinners told the truth about themselves": "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Lk 5:8), as Peter once said. A similar phrase would never fall from the lips of a hypocrite, who would instead say: "I thank you Lord, that I am not a sinner, that I am just" (cf. Lk 18:11).

Here then are three phrases to meditate upon in this second week of Lent: "the invitation to conversion; the gift that the Lord will give us", which is that of "great forgiveness"; and "the 'trap', of 'making a pretence' of converting and taking the path of hypocrisy". With these three words at heart we can take part in the Eucharist, "our action of grace", in which we hear "the invitation of the Lord: Come to me, eat of me. I will change your life. Do justice, do good, but please, look away from the leaven of the Pharisees, from hypocrisy".