



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAЕ

The true fast

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How can you pay €200 for a meal and then pretend not to see a starving man outside the restaurant door? How can you talk about fasting and penance and then not pay taxes for domestic help or a fair wage to your employees, paying them “under the table” instead? Some people are tempted to “accept the bribe of vanity”, wanting to appear good by making “a nice offering to the Church” while exploiting people. Pope Francis cautioned against taking this path, as he celebrated Mass on Friday morning, 3 March. His reflection on the meaning of the “true fast”, was inspired by the eloquent timeliness of the words of the Prophet Isaiah: this “is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; Sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the poor and the homeless; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own” (cf. 58:6-7).

“The Word of the Lord”, Francis noted immediately, “today speaks of fasting, which is the penance that we are invited to do in this Season of Lent: penance so as to draw near to the Lord”. In Psalm 51[50], in fact, “we prayed: ‘A contrite heart, O Lord, you will not scorn’”. For “the heart that feels it is a sinner and knows it is a sinner, is presented as such before God and before others just the same: ‘I am a sinner and thus I try to humble myself’”.

The first reading, the Pope explained, referring to the day's passage taken from the Prophet Isaiah (58:1-9), "is a discussion between God and those who lament that God does not listen to their prayers, their penance, their fasting". The Lord tells them: "Your fasting is an artificial fast; it is not a true fast; it is a fast to fulfil a formality". Because, Francis affirmed, "they fasted only to comply with certain laws". And in the passage of Isaiah, "they lament because their fast is not effective" and they ask: "why fast, if You do not see it; humble ourselves if You do not know?". But, "Behold" — the Lord responds — 'you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with wicked fist'. In other words, "on the one hand you fast, you repent, and on the other hand you carry out injustices". In the end, the Pope explained, "they believed that fasting was somewhat like 'dressing up' the heart: 'I am just because I fast'". And "it is the lament that John's disciples — who were good — make to Jesus and the Pharisees: 'I am just, I dress up my heart but then I argue, I exploit people'".

"On your fast day you carry out your own pursuits": this "is the most incisive sense", the Pope said, adding that it entails "dirty deals". A way of dealing that "Jesus always called hypocrisy". Thus, Pope Francis continued, "we heard when Jesus spoke of this, last Wednesday: 'When you fast, do not look dismal, with a sad face, so that all the people see you are fasting'. And "when you pray, do not be seen praying so the people say: 'what a good, just person'". Moreover, "when you give alms, sound no trumpet".

Returning to the passage of Isaiah, Francis continued: "the Lord explains what true fasting is to these people who complained: 'This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; Sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the poor and the homeless; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own. I want this, this is the fasting that I wish'".

The other form, instead, is "the 'hypocritical' fast — the word that Jesus used often — and is fasting in order to be seen or to feel just", but as I do this, "in the meantime I have done injustices, I am not just, I exploit people". It is worthless to say: "I am generous; I give a nice offering to the Church". Instead, "tell me, do you pay your domestic workers fairly? Do you pay your employees 'under the table', or as the law requires so they can feed their children?".

Francis recalled "a story that I heard told by Fr Arrupe", the Spanish priest who had been the Superior General of the Society of Jesus from 1965 to 1983: "When he was a missionary in Japan, at the beginning, full of apostolic zeal, after the atomic bomb, he toured several countries in the world to inspire this apostolic zeal and to request prayers for the mission in Japan and to ask for help. He held conferences and explained. He was a man of great apostolic zeal and a man of prayer, truly". Fr Arrupe, "in speaking about this hypocrisy, said that one day, after a conference, he was approached by a person who was very important in that country's society, who said to him: 'I was moved, Father, by what you said. I would really like to help you. Come to my place, to my office, tomorrow, because I would like to give you an offering, some help. I shall expect you tomorrow'". And so "the next day", the Jesuit "went to him"; but the man "was waiting for him with a

photographer and a journalist. He was a well-known businessman and said to him, 'Father, thank you very much'. He gave a little speech, opened a drawer, picked up an envelope: 'This is the offering for Japan that I wanted to give you. Thank you very much'. They spoke a bit and he left. He held another conference. Then he gave the envelope to the secretary who was helping him, and the secretary came and said: 'Father, who gave you this envelope?' — 'There are ten dollars in it!'

This, the Pope noted, "is the same thing we do when we do not pay our people fairly". In so doing, "we take away from our penance, from our acts of prayer, of fasting, of alms-giving; we accept a 'bribe': the bribe of vanity, of making ourselves seen". But "that is not authenticity; it is hypocrisy". Thus, the Pontiff continued, "when Jesus says: 'when you pray, do so in secret; when you give alms, sound no trumpet; when you fast, do not look dismal'. It is the same as if he were to say: 'please, when you do a good deed, do not take the bribe of this good deed, it is only for the Father'".

In the passage of Isaiah, the Pontiff continued, there is a word the Lord addressed to those "who do this hypocritical fast", which "seems to be said for our time: 'This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; Sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the poor and the homeless; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own'". Francis recommended we ponder "these words: let us think about our heart, how we fast, pray, give alms". And also, the Pope concluded, "it will help us to think about what a man feels after a dinner for which he paid, I don't know, €200", then "goes home and sees a hungry person and does not look at him, but continues to walk. It will do us good to think about this".