



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO LUXEMBOURG AND BELGIUM

(26-29 September 2024)

HOLY MASS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS

King Baudouin Stadium (Brussels)

Sunday, 29 September 2024

[Multimedia]

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea” (Mk 9:42). With these words, directed to the disciples, Jesus warns of the danger of scandal, that is, of hindering the path and hurting the lives of the “little ones”. It is a stern warning that calls us to pause and reflect. I would like to do so with you, in the light of the other Sacred Texts, by looking at three key words: *openness, communion and witness*.

Let us begin with *openness*. Both the first reading and the Gospel speak about the free action of the Holy Spirit. In the first account, the Spirit bestows the gift of prophecy not only upon the elders gathered with Moses at the tent of meeting, but also upon the two men who had remained in the camp.

This event leads us to reflect. At first, the absence of the two men from the group of the elect was a cause of scandal. After the Spirit rested upon them, however, it becomes scandalous to forbid them from exercising the mission they had indeed received. Moses, a humble and wise man, understood this, and responded with an open mind and heart: “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!” (Nm 11:29). What a beautiful insight!

These wise words foreshadow what Jesus says in the Gospel (cf. *Mk* 9:38-43, 45, 47-48). We find the disciples in Capernaum forbidding a man to cast out demons in the Teacher's name because — according to them — “he was not following us” (*Mk* 9:38), which means, “he is not part of our group”. They reason along these lines: “Whoever does not follow us, whoever is not ‘one of us’ cannot perform miracles for he has no right to do so”. Once again, they are surprised by Jesus' response. Jesus always surprises us. He surprises and rebukes them and invites them to look beyond their own way of understanding things; he invites them not to be “scandalized” by the freedom of God. He tells them, “Do not forbid him... he that is not against us is for us” (*Mk* 9:39-40).

We must carefully consider both accounts, that of Moses and of Jesus because they apply to us and to our Christian life. Indeed, by virtue of Baptism, all of us have received a mission in the Church. This mission is a gift and not a reason to boast. The community of believers is not a select circle of a privileged few; it is the family of those who are saved. We have been sent into the world to preach the Gospel based not on our own merits, but by the grace of God. In spite of our limitations and sins, God continues to show us his mercy and his faithfulness, as the loving Father who sees in us what we ourselves cannot perceive. He therefore calls us, sends us and patiently accompanies us day by day.

If we wish to cooperate lovingly and attentively with the free action of the Spirit without being a source of scandal or an obstacle to those around us through our arrogance or rigidity, we must carry out our mission with humility, gratitude and joy. We ought not to be resentful towards others for being able to do what we do, but rejoice that the kingdom of God is thus encouraged to grow until the day we are united in the arms of the Father.

This brings us to the next word: *communion*. Saint James speaks of this in the second reading (cf. *Jas* 5:1-6) using two vivid images: riches that corrupt (cf. v. 3) and the protests of the harvesters that have reached the ears of the Lord (cf. v. 4). He reminds us that the only path that leads to life is that of self-donation, of love that unites through giving of oneself. The path of selfishness generates closed-mindedness, walls and obstacles—we can call them “scandals”—that chain us down to material things and separate us from God and from our brothers and sisters.

Selfishness, like everything that impedes charity, is “scandalous” because it crushes those who are little. It humiliates people in their dignity and suppresses the cry of the afflicted (cf. *Ps* 9:12). This was a problem in Saint Paul's time and still is today. What would happen if we were to put self-interest and market mentalities as the sole foundations for communities and individuals (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 54-58)? There would no longer be space for those who are in need, nor mercy for those who make mistakes, nor compassion for those who suffer and cannot move forward in life. These things would not be possible for them. Let us think of what happens to those “little ones” who are scandalized, wounded, abused by those who should have taken care of them. Let us think of the painful wounds and the powerlessness felt especially by victims, but also that of

their families and communities. With heart and mind, I think of the stories of some of the “little ones” whom I met the other day. I listened to them. I felt their suffering stemming from abuse. I would like to repeat here: there is room for everyone, everyone, everyone in the Church but all of us will be judged. There is no room for abuse. There is no room for covering up abuse. I implore everyone: do not cover up abuse! I implore the Bishops: do not cover up abuse! Hold abusers accountable but help them to overcome this sickness. We should not hide bad things that happen. They must be brought to light so that we know about them. Some who were abused did just that with courage. We must know about it. Abusers must be held accountable regardless of their status: layperson, priest or Bishop. They must be held accountable.

The word of God is clear. The protests of the harvesters and the cries of the afflicted cannot be ignored. We cannot simply erase them, as if they were the discordant note in a perfect concert performed in a perfect world. We cannot stifle their cries through superficial attempts of social assistance. They are the living voice of the Spirit because they remind us that we are all poor sinners – I the first among them. Those who have been abused are a cry that rises up to heaven, a cry that touches our souls and makes us feel shameful while calling us to conversion. We must not suffocate this prophetic voice or silence it by our indifference. Let us listen to what Jesus says in the Gospel: Get behind me, scandalous *eyes* that see the needy and look away! Get behind me, scandalous *hands* that close your fists to hide your treasures and stash them away in your pockets! My grandmother always said: “The devil enters through the pockets”. Also too the hands that commit sexual abuse, an abuse of power, an abuse of conscience against those who are weaker. How many cases of abuse there are in our history, in our society! Get behind me, scandalous *feet* that run quickly, not to draw near to those who suffer, but to avoid them and stay away! We must leave this mentality behind! Nothing good or solid can be built upon it! There is a question that I like to ask people: “Do you give alms?” – “Yes, Father, yes” – “So tell me, when you give alms, do you touch the hand of the needy person or do you toss it at them and keep a distance? Do you look into the eyes of the people who are suffering?”. Let us think about this.

If we want to sow seeds for the future, also regarding social and economic issues, it would be helpful for us to put the Gospel of mercy at the foundation of our choices. Jesus is mercy. All of us are beneficiaries of his mercy. Otherwise, the monuments of our opulence, however seemingly imposing, will be no more than giants with feet of clay (cf. *Dn* 2:31-45). Let us not deceive ourselves: without love, nothing lasts. Everything disappears and falls apart, and we are left as prisoners of a fleeting, empty and meaningless life in a hypocritical world. It is devoid of all credibility despite its façades. Why? Because it *has scandalized the little ones*.

That brings us to the third word: *witness*. The history of the Belgian Church is rich in examples of holiness. Let us consider Saint Gudula, the patron saint of this country (650-712ca), Saint Guy of Anderlecht, the pilgrim and friend of the poor (+1012), Saint Damien de Veuster, better known as Damien of Molokai, the apostle to the lepers (1840-1889), and the many Belgian missionaries who have proclaimed the Gospel in various parts of the world over the centuries, sometimes to the

point of sacrificing their lives.

The witness of a Carmelite nun has also blossomed in this fertile land: Anne of Jesus, Anna de Lobera, whose Beatification we celebrate today. In the Church of her time, this woman was among the protagonists of a great reform movement. She followed in the footsteps of a “giant of the spirit”, Teresa of Avila, and helped spread her ideals throughout Spain, France, here, in Brussels, and in what was then called the Spanish Netherlands.

In a time marked by painful scandals, within and outside of the Christian community, she and her companions brought many people back to the faith through their simple lives of poverty, prayer, work and charity. Some have called their foundation in this city a “spiritual magnet”.

She intentionally left no writings to posterity. Instead, she committed herself to putting into practice what she had learned (cf. *1 Cor* 15:3), and by her way of life she helped lift up the Church at a time of great difficulty.

Let us then gratefully welcome the example she has given us of “feminine styles of holiness” (cf. *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 12), gentle but strong. Her testimony, together with those of so many brothers and sisters who have gone before us, our friends and fellow pilgrims, is not far from us: it is near us, indeed it is entrusted to us so that we may also make it our own, renewing our commitment to walk together in the footsteps of the Lord.