



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE **BOLLETTINO**

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIÈGE PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHL
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE SALA DE IMPRENSA DA SANTA SÉ
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N. 211223c

Thursday 23.12.2021

Audience of the Holy Father with the Roman Curia for the exchange of Christmas wishes

This morning, in the Hall of Blessings in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the cardinals and superiors of the Roman Curia for the presentation of Christmas wishes.

During the meeting, the Pope addressed the following words to the Roman Curia:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good day!

As is the case every year, we have the chance to meet a few days before the feast of Christmas. It is a way to express our fraternity “out loud” through the exchange of Christmas greetings. Yet it is also a moment of reflection and assessment for each of us, so that the light of the Word made flesh can show us even better who we are and what our mission is.

We all know that the mystery of Christmas is the mystery of God who enters the world by the path of humility. He became flesh, that great *synkatábasis*. Our times seem either to have forgotten humility or to have relegated it to a form of moralism, emptying it of its explosive power.

Yet if we had to express the entire mystery of Christmas in a word, I believe that *humility* is the one most helpful. The Gospels portray a scene of poverty and austerity, unsuited to sheltering a woman about to give birth. Yet the *King of kings* enters the world not by attracting attention, but by causing a mysterious pull in the hearts of those who feel the thrilling presence of something completely new, something on the verge of changing history. That is why I like to think and also say that *humility was its doorway, and invites us to enter through it*. I think of that passage of the Exercises [that says that] one cannot advance without humility, and one cannot advance in humility without humiliations. Saint Ignatius tells us to ask for humiliations.

It is not easy to understand what humility is. It is the effect of a change that the Spirit himself brings about in us in our daily lives. Such was the case, for example, of Naaman the Syrian (cf. *2 Kings* 5). In the days of the prophet Elisha, this man enjoyed great renown. He was a valiant general of the Syrian army who had on many occasions demonstrated his bravery and courage. Yet together with fame, power, esteem, honours and glory, Naaman was forced to live with a tragic situation: he had leprosy. His armour, that had won him renown, in reality covered a frail, wounded and diseased humanity. We often find this contradiction in our lives: sometimes great gifts are the armour that covers great frailties.

Naaman came to understand a fundamental truth: we cannot spend our lives hiding behind armour, a role we play, or social recognition; in the end, it hurts us. The moment comes in each individual's life when he or she desires to set aside the glitter of this world's glory for the fullness of an authentic life, with no further need for armour or masks. This desire impelled the valiant general Naaman to set out on a journey in search of someone who could help him, and he did this at the suggestion of a slave girl, a Jewish prisoner of war, who told him of a God able to bring healing to hopeless situations like his own.

Laden with silver and gold, Naaman set out on his journey and thus came to the prophet Elisha, who laid down for him, as the only condition for his healing, the simple gesture of disrobing and washing seven times in the Jordan River. Nothing to do with celebrity, honours, gold or silver! The grace that saves is free; it is not reducible to the price of this world's goods.

Naaman resisted; the prophet's demand seemed to him too ordinary, too simple, too easily attainable. *It seems that the power of simplicity found no room in his imagination.* Yet the words of his servants made him change his mind: "If the prophet had commanded you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much rather, then, when he says to you, 'Wash and be clean?'" (*2 Kings* 5:13). Naaman gave in, and with a gesture of humility "descended", took off his armour, went down into the waters of the Jordan "and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean" (*2 Kings* 5:14). A great lesson, this! The humility of exposing his own humanity, in accordance with the word of the Lord, gained healing for Naaman.

The story of Naaman reminds us that Christmas is a time when each of us needs to find the courage to take off our armour, discard the trappings of our roles, our social recognition and the glitter of this world and adopt the humility of Naaman. We can do this by starting from a more powerful, more convincing and more authoritative example: that of the Son of God who did not shrink from the humility of "descending" into history, becoming man, becoming a child, frail, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger (cf. *Lk* 2:16). Once we strip ourselves of our robes, our prerogatives, positions and titles, all of us are lepers, all of us are in need of healing. Christmas is the living reminder of this realization and it helps us to understand it more deeply.

Dear brothers and sisters, if we forget our humanity, we live off the glitter of our armour. Jesus, however, reminds us of the uncomfortable and unsettling truth: "What will it profit you to gain the whole world and forfeit your life?" (cf. *Mk* 8:36).

This is the dangerous temptation – as I have said on other occasions – of a spiritual worldliness that, unlike all other temptations, is hard to unmask, for it is concealed by everything that usually reassures us: our role, the liturgy, doctrine, religious devotion. As I wrote in *Evangelii Gaudium*, such spiritual worldliness "also feeds the vainglory of those who are content to have a modicum of power and would rather be the general of a defeated army than a mere private in a unit which continues to fight. How often we dream up vast apostolic projects, meticulously planned, just like defeated generals! But this is to deny our history as a Church, which is glorious precisely because it is a history of sacrifice, of hopes and daily struggles, of lives spent in service and fidelity to work, tiring as it may be, for all work is the 'sweat of our brow'. Instead, we waste time talking about 'what needs to be done' – in Spanish, we call this the sin of *habriaqueísmo* – like spiritual masters and pastoral experts who give instructions from on high. We indulge in endless fantasies and we lose contact with the real lives and difficulties of our people" (No. 96).

Humility is the ability to know how to "*inhabit*" our humanity, this humanity beloved and blessed by the Lord, and to do so without despair but with realism, joy and hope. Humility means recognizing that we should not be

ashamed of our frailty. Jesus teaches us to look upon our poverty with the same love and tenderness with which we look upon a little child, vulnerable and in need of everything. Lacking humility, we will look for things that can reassure us, and perhaps find them, but we will surely not find what saves us, what can heal us. Seeking those kinds of reassurance is the most perverse fruit of spiritual worldliness, for it reveals a lack of faith, hope and love; it leads to an inability to discern the truth of things. If Naaman had continued only to accumulate medals to decorate his armour, in the end he would have been devoured by his leprosy: appearing to be alive, yet enclosed and isolated in his disease. Instead, Namaan had the courage to seek the thing that could save him, not what would bring him gratification in the short term.

We all know that the opposite of humility is pride. A verse from the prophet Malachi, which has struck me, can help us to understand the difference between the path of humility and the path of pride: “All the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch” (4:1).

The Prophet uses the evocative image of “stubble”, which describes pride in vivid terms, for once the fire starts, stubble immediately becomes ash; it burns up and disappears. Malachi also tells us that those who live by pride will find themselves deprived of the most important things in life: roots and branches. Roots represent our vital link to the past, from which we draw the sap that enables us to live in the present. Branches represent our present, which, far from dying, grows into tomorrow and becomes the future. To remain in a present that no longer has roots or branches means living our last hour. That is the way of the proud who, enclosed in their little world, have neither past nor future, roots or branches, and live with the bitter taste of a melancholy that weighs on their hearts as “the most precious of the devil’s potions”.^[1] The humble, on the other hand, live their lives constantly guided by two verbs: to *remember* their roots and to *give life*. In this way, their roots and branches bear fruit, enabling them to live joyful and fruitful lives.

In Italian, the etymology of the verb *remember* [*ricordare*] is “to bring to heart”. Our living memory of Tradition, of our roots, is not worship of the past but an interior movement whereby we constantly bring to our hearts everything that preceded us, marked our history and brought us to where we are today. Remembering does not mean repeating, but treasuring, reviving and, with gratitude, allowing the power of the Holy Spirit to set our hearts on fire, like those of the first disciples (cf. *Lk24:32*).

Yet, if our remembering is not to make us prisoners of the past, we need another verb: to *give life*, to “generate”. The humble – humble men or women – are those who are concerned not simply with the past, but also with the future, since they know how to look ahead, to spread their branches, remembering the past with gratitude. The humble give life, attract others and push onwards towards the unknown that lies ahead. The proud, on the other hand, simply repeat, grow rigid – rigidity is a perversion, a present-day perversion – and enclose themselves in that repetition, feeling certain about what they know and fearful of anything new because they cannot control it; they feel destabilized... because they have lost their memory.

The humble allow themselves to be challenged. They are open to what is new, since they feel secure in what has gone before them, firm in their roots and their sense of belonging. Their present is grounded in a past that opens them up to a hope-filled future. Unlike the proud, they know that their existence is not based on their merits or their “good habits”. As such, they are able to trust, unlike the proud.

All of us are called to humility, because all of us are called to remember and to give life. We are called to find a right relationship with our roots and our branches. Without those two things, we become sick, destined to disappear.

Jesus, who came into the world by the path of humility, has opened a way for us; he indicates a way and shows us a goal.

Dear brothers and sisters, without humility we cannot encounter God and experience salvation, yet it is equally true that without humility we cannot even encounter our neighbours, our brothers and sisters next door.

Last 17 October, we set out on the synodal journey that will occupy us for the next two years. In this too, humility alone can enable us to encounter and listen, to dialogue and discern, to pray together, as the Cardinal Dean said. If we remain enclosed in our convictions and experiences, the hard shell of our own thoughts and feelings, it will be difficult to be open to that experience of the Spirit, which, as the Apostle says, is born of the conviction that we are all children of “one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (*Eph 4:6*).

That word – “all” – leaves no room for misunderstanding! The clericalism that, as a temptation, a perverse temptation, daily spreads in our midst, makes us keep thinking of a God who speaks only to some, while the others must only listen and obey. The Synod wants to be an experience of feeling ourselves all members of a larger people, the holy and faithful People of God, and thus disciples who listen and, precisely by virtue of this listening, can also understand God’s will, which is always revealed in unpredictable ways. Yet it would be wrong to think that the Synod is an event meant for the Church, as something abstract and distant from us. Synodality is a “style” to which we must be converted, especially those of us here present and all those who serve the universal Church by their work for the Roman Curia.

The Curia – let us not forget – is not merely a logistical and bureaucratic instrument for meeting the needs of the universal Church, but the first body called to bear witness. Precisely for this reason, it grows in prestige and effectiveness when it embraces in first person the challenges of that synodal conversion to which it too is called. The organization that we must adopt is not that of a business, but evangelical in nature.

For this reason, if the word of God reminds the whole world of the value of poverty, we, the members of the Curia, must be the first to commit ourselves to being converted to a style of sobriety. If the Gospel proclaims justice, we must be the first to try to live transparently, without favouritism or cliques. If the Church follows the path of synodality, we must be the first to be converted to a different style of work, of cooperation and communion. All this is possible only by following the path of humility. Without humility, we cannot do this.

During the opening of the synodal assembly, I used three key words: *participation*, *communion* and *mission*. These arise from a humble heart: without humility there can be neither participation, nor communion, nor mission. Those words are the three requirements that I would like to indicate as a style of humility at which we here in the Curia should aim. Three ways to make the path of humility a concrete path to follow in practice.

First, *participation*. This ought to be expressed through a style of co-responsibility. Certainly, in the diversity of our roles and ministries, responsibilities will differ, yet it is important that everyone feel involved, co-responsible for the work, without having the depersonalizing experience of implementing a programme devised by someone else. I am always impressed, and I like it, whenever I encounter creativity in the Curia. Not infrequently, this occurs especially where room is made and space found for everyone, even those who appear, hierarchically, to occupy a marginal place. I thank you for these examples – which I find and I like – and I encourage you to work so that we are capable of generating concrete dynamics in which all can sense that they have an active role to play in the mission they have to carry out. Authority becomes service when it shares, involves and helps people to grow.

The second word is *communion*. This does not have to do with majorities or minorities; essentially, it is based on our relationship with Christ. We will never have an evangelical style in our respective settings unless we put Christ back in the centre, not this or that party opinion: Christ at the centre. Many of us work together, but what builds communion is also the ability to pray together, to listen together to God’s word and to construct relationships that go beyond work and strengthen beneficial relations between us by helping one another. Otherwise, we risk being nothing more than strangers working in the same place, competitors looking to advance or, worse yet, forging relationships based on personal interests, forgetting the common cause that holds us together. This creates divisions, factions and enemies, whereas cooperation demands the magnanimity to accept our own partiality and to be open to working in a group, even with those who do not think as we do. In cooperation, people work together, not for some extraneous purpose, but because they have at heart the good of others and, consequently, of the entire People of God whom we are called to serve. Let us not forget the real faces of people. Let us not forget our roots and the concrete faces of those who were our first teachers in the faith. As Paul said to Timothy: “Remember your mother, remember your grandmother”.

Seeing things from the standpoint of communion also entails acknowledging our diversity as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Whenever we step back from this, and regard communion as a synonym of uniformity, we weaken and stifle the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit in our midst. An attitude of service requires, and indeed demands, a good and generous heart, in order to recognize and experience with joy the manifold richness present in the People of God. Without humility, this will not happen. I find it helpful to reread the beginning of *Lumen Gentium*, numbers 8 and 12, about the holy faithful people of God. Reflecting on these truths is oxygen for the soul.

The third word is *mission*. This is what saves us from falling back on ourselves. Those who are turned in on themselves “look from above and from afar, they reject the prophecy of their brothers and sisters, they discredit those who raise questions, they constantly point out the mistakes of others and they are obsessed by appearances. Their hearts are open only to the limited horizon of their own immanence and interests, and as a consequence they neither learn from their sins nor are they genuinely open to forgiveness. These are the two signs of “closed” persons: they do not learn from their sins and they are not open to forgiveness. This is a tremendous corruption disguised as a good. We need to avoid it by making the Church constantly go out from herself, keeping her mission focused on Jesus Christ, and her commitment to the poor” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 97). Only a heart open to mission can ensure that everything we do, *ad intra* and *ad extra*, is marked by the regenerating power of the Lord’s call. Mission always involves passion for the poor, for those who are “in need”, not only of things material, but also spiritual, emotional and moral. Those who hunger for bread and those who hunger for meaning are equally poor. The Church is summoned to reach out to every form of poverty. The Church is called to preach the Gospel to everyone, since all of us are poor; all of us are, in one way or another, needy. But the Church also reaches out to the poor because we need them: we need their voice, their presence, their questions and criticisms. A person with a missionary heart feels the absence of his brother or sister, and, like a beggar, accosts him or her. Mission makes us vulnerable. This is beautiful, that mission makes us vulnerable. It helps remind us that we are disciples and it makes us rediscover ever anew the joy of the Gospel.

Participation, mission and communion are the characteristics of a humble Church, one attentive to voice of the Spirit and not self-centred. As Henri de Lubac wrote: “Like her master, the Church cuts in the eyes of the world the figure of a slave; on this earth she exists ‘in the form of a slave’... She is no cenacle of sublime spiritual geniuses or gathering of supermen, any more than she is an academy of the learned; in fact, she is the very opposite. The warped, the sham, and the wretched of very kind crowd into her, together with the whole host of the mediocre... It is hard, not to say entirely impossible, for the ‘natural man’ to find in such a phenomenon the consummation of the saving *kenosis* and the awe-inspiring traces of the ‘humility of God’ – that is, until his innermost thoughts have been radically changed” (*The Splendour of the Church*, 301).

In conclusion, my desire for you, and for myself, is that we may allow ourselves to be evangelized by the humility of Christmas and the humility of the manger, by the poverty and simplicity with which the Son of God entered into the world. Even the Magi, who were certainly of a higher social position than Mary and Joseph or the shepherds of Bethlehem, fell to their knees in the presence of the Child (cf. *Mt* 2:11). They fell to their knees. To do so is not only a gesture of adoration but also a gesture of humility. When they fell to the bare earth, the Magi put themselves at the same level as God. This *kenosis*, this descent, this *synkatábasis*, is the same that Jesus would make on the last evening of his earthly life, when he “rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded” (*Jn* 13:4-5). Peter’s response to that gesture was one of dismay, but Jesus himself showed his disciples the right way to interpret it: “You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (*Jn* 13:13-15).

Dear brothers and sisters, mindful of our own leprosy, and shunning the worldly thinking that deprives us of our roots and branches, let us allow ourselves to be evangelized by the humility of the Child Jesus. Only by serving, and by seeing our work as service, can we be truly helpful to everyone. We are here – I myself before anyone else – to learn how to kneel and adore the Lord in his humility, not other lords in their empty trappings. We are like the shepherds, we are like the Magi; we are like Jesus. This is the lesson of Christmas: humility is the great condition for faith, for the spiritual life and for holiness. May the Lord grant it to us as a gift, starting with the primordial sign of the Spirit’s presence within us: desire. And to ask the Lord for the grace to wish to desire it, to become men and women of great desires. What we lack, we can at least begin to desire. And that desire is

already the Spirit at work within each of us.

A happy Christmas to all! And I ask you to pray for me. Thank you!

As a Christmas gift this year, I would like to leave you a few books... Books to read, not to put on a bookshelf, for whoever will inherit our estate! First of all, a book by a great theologian, little known because he was too humble, an Undersecretary of the Doctrine of the Father, Monsignor Armando Matteo, who takes a look at one social phenomenon and how it calls for a pastoral response. It is called *Converting Peter Pan*. On the *fate of faith* in this *society of eternal youth*. It is provocative, and helpful. The second is a book on minor or forgotten characters of the Bible, by Father Luigi Maria Epicoco: *The Rejected Cornerstone*, with the subtitle *When the Forgotten are Saved*. It is beautiful. It is for meditation, for prayer. Reading it, I thought of the story of Naaman the Syrian whom I mentioned. The third is by an Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Fortunatus Nwachukwu, whom you know well. He wrote a reflection on gossip, and I like the picture he painted: that gossip leads to a “dissolution” of identity. I am leaving these three books for you, and I hope that they will help everyone to keep moving forward. Thank you for your work and your cooperation. Thank you.

Let us now ask the Mother of Humility to teach us how to be humble: “Hail Mary...” [Blessing]

[1] G. Bernanos, *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, Paris, 1974, 135.
