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The Pope creates seventeen new cardinals: Jesus continues to call us and to send us to the “plain” where our people dwell

This morning in St. Peter’s Basilica the Holy Father celebrated an ordinary public consistory for the creation of seventeen new cardinals, to whom he imposed the biretta, consigned the ring and assigned the respective title or diaconate church.

At the beginning of the event, Archbishop Mario Zenari, apostolic nuncio in Syria and the first among the new cardinals, addressed a greeting and some words of gratitude to the Holy Father on behalf of them all.

The ceremony began with greetings, prayer and the reading of a passage from the Gospel according to St. Luke (6, 27-36), after which Pope Francis pronounced the following homily:

“The Gospel passage we have just heard (cf. Lk 6:27-36) is often referred to as the ‘Sermon on the Plain’. After choosing the Twelve, Jesus came down with his disciples to a great multitude of people who were waiting to hear him and to be healed. The call of the Apostles is linked to this ‘setting out’, descending to the plain to encounter the multitudes who, as the Gospel says, were ‘troubled’. Instead of keeping the Apostles at the top of the mountain, their being chosen leads them to the heart of the crowd; it sets them in the midst of those who are troubled, on the ‘plain’ of their daily lives. The Lord thus shows the Apostles, and ourselves, that the true heights are reached on the plain, while the plain reminds us that the heights are found in a gaze and above all in a call: ‘Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful’.

This call is accompanied by four commands or exhortations, which the Lord gives as a way of moulding the Apostles’ vocation through real, everyday situations. They are four actions that will shape, embody and make tangible the path of discipleship. We could say that they represent four stages of a mystagogy of mercy: love, do good, bless and pray. I think we can all agree on these, and see them as something reasonable. They are four things we can easily do for our friends and for those more or less close to us, people we like, people whose tastes and habits are similar to our own.

The problem comes when Jesus tells us for whom we have to do these things. Here He is very clear. He minces no words, He uses no euphemisms. He tells us: love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you.

These are not things we spontaneously do in dealing with people we consider our opponents or enemies. Our first instinctive reaction in such cases is to dismiss, discredit or curse them. Often we try to 'demonise' them, so as to have a 'sacred' justification for dismissing them. Jesus tells us to do exactly the opposite with our enemies, those who hate us, those who curse us or slander us. We are to love them, to do good to them, to bless them and to pray for them.

Here we find ourselves confronted with one of the very hallmarks of Jesus' message, where its power and secret are concealed. Here too is the source of our joy, the power of our mission and our preaching of the Good News. My enemy is someone I must love. In God's heart there are no enemies. God only has sons and daughters. We are the ones who raise walls, build barriers and label people. God has sons and daughters, precisely so that no one will be turned away. God's love has the flavour of fidelity towards everyone, for it is a visceral love, a parental love that never abandons us, even when we go astray. Our Father does not wait for us to be good before He loves the world, He does not wait for us to be a little bit better or more perfect before He loves us; He loves us because He chose to love us, He loves us because He has made us His sons and daughters. He loved us even when we were enemies. The Father's unconditional love for all people was, and is, the true prerequisite for the conversion of our pitiful hearts that tend to judge, divide, oppose and condemn. To know that God continues to love even those who reject Him is a boundless source of confidence and an impetus for our mission. No matter how sullied our hands may be, God cannot be stopped from placing in those hands the Life He wishes to bestow on us.

Ours is an age of grave global problems and issues. We live at a time in which polarisation and exclusion are burgeoning and considered the only way to resolve conflicts. We see, for example, how quickly those among us with the status of a stranger, an immigrant, or a refugee, become a threat, take on the status of an enemy. An enemy because they come from a distant country or have different customs. An enemy because of the colour of their skin, their language or their social class. An enemy because they think differently or even have a different faith. An enemy because... And, without our realising it, this way of thinking becomes part of the way we live and act. Everything and everyone then begins to savour of animosity. Little by little, our differences turn into symptoms of hostility, threats and violence. How many wounds grow deeper due to this epidemic of animosity and violence, which leaves its mark on the flesh of many of the defenceless, because their voice is weak and silenced by this pathology of indifference! How many situations of uncertainty and suffering are sown by this growing animosity between peoples, between us! Yes, between us, within our communities, our priests, our meetings. The virus of polarisation and animosity permeates our way of thinking, feeling and acting. We are not immune from this and we need to take care lest such attitudes find a place in our hearts, because this would be contrary to the richness and universality of the Church, which is tangibly evident in the College of Cardinals. We come from distant lands; we have different traditions, skin colour, languages and social backgrounds; we think differently and we celebrate our faith in a variety of rites. None of this makes us enemies; instead, it is one of our greatest riches.

Dear brothers and sisters, Jesus never stops 'coming down from the mountain'. He constantly desires to enter the crossroads of our history to proclaim the Gospel of Mercy. Jesus continues to call us and to send us to the 'plain' where our people dwell. He continues to invite us to spend our lives sustaining our people in hope, so that they can be signs of reconciliation. As the Church, we are constantly being asked to open our eyes to see the wounds of so many of our brothers and sisters deprived of their dignity, deprived in their dignity.

My dear brothers, newly created Cardinals, the journey towards heaven begins in the plains, in a daily life broken and shared, spent and given. In the quiet daily gift of all that we are. Our mountaintop is this quality of love; our goal and aspiration is to strive, on life's plain, together with the People of God, to become persons capable of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Today each of you, dear brothers, is asked to cherish in your own heart, and in the heart of the Church, this

summons to be merciful like the Father. And to realise that 'if something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life'.

After the homily, the Holy Father read the formula for creation and solemnly proclaimed the names of the new cardinals, announcing the presbyteral or diaconal order. The rite continued with the profession of faith of the new cardinals before the people of God, and the vow of fidelity and obedience to Pope Francis and his successors.

The new cardinals, according to the order of their creation, then kneeled before the Holy Father who imposed the zucchetto and biretta, consigned the ring and assigned to each one of them a Church in Rome, as a sign of participation in the pastoral solicitude of the Pope in the Urbe.

After consigning the Bull of the Creation of Cardinals and the assignation of the titular church or diaconate, the Holy Father exchanged an embrace of peace with each new cardinal.
