



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

The scent of a sinner

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(by L'Osservatore Romano, Weekly ed. in English, n. 39, 26 September 2014)

The Lord saves “only when we open the heart” in the “truth of our sins”. This was the lesson that Pope Francis drew from the day’s Reading from the Gospel according to Luke (7:36-50). The passage relates the story of the sinful woman who, at lunch in a Pharisee’s home, without being invited, approaches Christ with “a flask of ointment” and “standing behind him at his feet, weeping”, she begins to “wet his feet with her tears”, then wiping them “with the hair of her head”, kisses them and anoints them with ointment.

The Pontiff explained that the very “recognition of sins, our misery, the recognition of what we are and what we are capable of doing or have done is the door that opens to the caress of Jesus, to the forgiveness of Jesus, to the Word of Jesus: Go in peace, your faith has saved you, because you have been brave, you have been courageous in opening your heart to him who alone can save you”. In this regard the Pope repeated an expression especially dear to him: “the privileged place for the encounter with Christ is our sins”.

Pope Francis commented that to the untrained ear this “would almost seem heresy, but even St Paul said it” in the Second Letter to the Corinthians (12:9), when he affirmed boasting of “only two things: of his sins and of the Risen Christ who saved him”.

The Bishop of Rome introduced his reflection by reconstructing the scene described in the Gospel

passage. He explained that the man “who invited Jesus to lunch was a person of a certain level, cultured, perhaps an academic. He wanted to hear Jesus’ teaching because, as a good and cultured person he was unsettled”, and sought to “know more”. And “it doesn’t seem that he was a bad person”, and nor were “the others who were at the table”. Until a female figure bursts into the banquet: deep down “an ill-mannered woman” who “actually enters where she was not invited”. One who was not cultured or, if she was, she did not show it here”. In fact “she enters and does what she wants to do: without apologizing, without asking permission”. The Pope observed, “Jesus lets her do” all this.

It is here that reality is revealed behind the facade of good manners, with the Pharisee who begins to think to himself: “If this man were a prophet, he would know who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner”. This was not a “bad” man, yet “he was unable to understand the woman’s gesture. He was unable to understand the basic gestures of the people”. Perhaps, Francis underlined, “this man had forgotten how to caress a child, how to console a grandmother. In his theories, in his thoughts, in his government life — because perhaps he was a councilor to the Pharisees — he had forgotten the first gestures of life that we all, right at birth, began to receive from our parents”. In other words he “was far from reality”. Only in this way, the Pope continued, can his “accusation” toward Jesus be explained: “This is a holy man! He speaks to us of beautiful things, he performs some magic; he is a healer; but in the end he does not know the people, because if he knew what sort of woman this is he would have said something”.

Here then are two very different “approaches”: on one side is that of the “man who sees and qualifies”, he judges; and on the other, that of the “woman who cries and does seemingly mad things”, because she uses ointment which “is expensive, it’s costly”. The Pontiff paused on the particular fact that in the Gospel the word “anoint” is used to signify that the “woman’s ointment anoints: it has the capacity to become an unction”, to the contrary of the Pharisee’s words, which “do not touch the heart, do not touch the body, do not touch reality”.

Between these two very antithetical figures is Jesus, with “his patience, his love”, his “will to save everyone”, which “lead him to explain to the Pharisee the meaning of what this woman is doing” and to reproach him, although “with humility and tenderness”, for having lacked “courtesy” toward him. “I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment”.

The Pope also highlighted that the Gospel does not say “how the story ends for this man”, but it clearly tells “how it ends for the woman: ‘your sins are forgiven!’”. This sentence scandalized “those who were at the table with him, who began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this, who even forgives sins?’”. While Jesus continues straight on his path and “says that phrase so often repeated in the Gospel: ‘Go in peace, your faith has saved you!’”. In other words, “she is told that

her sins are forgiven” while “Jesus only shows and explains gestures to the others, that is, what they haven’t done for him”. It is a difference which Francis wanted to stress: in the woman’s behaviour “there is so very much love”, while regarding that of the dinner companions, Jesus does not say that love is lacking, “but he makes it understood”. As a result, “the words of salvation — ‘Your faith has saved you!’ — he says only to the woman, who is a sinner. And he tells her because she has managed to weep for her sins, so to speak. ‘I am a sinner’”. On the contrary, “he doesn’t say it to those people” who, although they were not “bad”, these people actually “believed they weren’t sinners”. To them “the sinners were the others: the publicans, the prostitutes”.

Here then is the lesson of the Gospel: “Salvation enters the heart only when we open the heart in the truth of our sins”. Of course the Bishop of Rome reasoned, “none of us will go to make the gesture that this woman did”, because it is “a cultural gesture of that period; but we all have the opportunity to weep, we all have the opportunity to open ourselves and say: Lord save me! We all have the opportunity to encounter the Lord”. This is also because, the Pope indicated, “to the other people in this Gospel passage, Jesus says nothing. But in another passage he will say those terrible words: “Hypocrites, because you are detached from reality, from the truth!”. And yet, in reference to the example of this sinful woman, he will caution: “Think hard, it will be the prostitutes and the publicans to go before you into the kingdom of heaven”. Because they, the Pontiff concluded, “feel they are sinners” and “they open their heart in the confession of sins, at the encounter with Jesus, who gave his blood for all of us”.