



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

Like peeling an onion

Thursday, 25 September 2014

(by *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly ed. in English, n. 40, 3 October 2014)

There are many “Christians who strut about”, afflicted by vanity, who “live for appearances” and live “to be seen”. They end up turning their life into “a soap bubble”, pretty but fleeting, going round with too much makeup or perhaps trying to make a good impression by displaying “cheques for works of the Church” or recalling they are “related to that bishop”. But this is living a liar’s life, deceiving even themselves. What counts, instead, is “the truth, the concrete reality of the Gospel”. Pope Francis asked Christians to look only at their “life with the Lord” and not to “sound the trumpet”, offering encouragement which was “perhaps a bit cruel, but true”. During Mass at Santa Marta, he commented on the day’s Reading, a well-known passage from the Book of Ecclesiastes, the “vanity of vanities” (1:2-11), pointing out that it is not “pessimistic”, as it may seem. Instead, it tells us “the truth” and that “everything passes and if you have nothing of substance, you too will pass, like all things”.

The Scripture passage, Francis explained, “begins with that key word: ‘vanity’”. Indeed, “a person’s life may be a robust life, which does many good things”. On the other hand, however, “there is also the temptation” to make it “a life of vanity, of living for things without substance, which pass”. Essentially, there is temptation “to live for appearances”, and to live “to be seen”, and this happens “not only among pagans, but among people of faith, among Christians”.

Instead, the Pope affirmed, Jesus “really reproached” people who were vain, “those who were boastful”. Thus, “he told the doctors of the law that they should not walk in the public squares with such luxurious clothing. They looked like princes!”. And he admonished them: “This is what pleases you, not the truth”. And the Lord, who “strongly reproached” them, also said to vain people: “When you pray, please do not be seen. Do not pray so they see you praying”. He also advised against wearing particular clothes to pray.

Basically, Jesus suggested the opposite approach: “Pray in private, go to your room — you and the Lord — without being seen”. Moreover, “when you help the poor or give to charity, don’t sound the trumpet, do it privately. The Father sees it, this is enough”.

However, the Pope indicated, conceited people care to think: “I’ll give this cheque for works of the Church” and then they show off the cheque. And then perhaps “they cheat the Church” as well. This is exactly the way of the vain person who basically “lives for appearances”. And the Lord clearly says to these people: “When you fast, please, do not be gloomy, sad so that everyone is aware that you are fasting. Fast with joy. Do penance with joy” so that “no one notices”.

Thus, Francis warned against the temptation of “vanity, which is living for appearances, living to be seen”, and he recognized that his words were “perhaps a bit cruel, but true”. The Pope described that “Christians who live for appearances, for vanity, resemble peacocks: they strut about!”. And they say, “I’m a Christian, I’m related to that priest, to that nun, to that bishop; my family is Christian, we’re all good”. However, what counts, Pope Francis explained, is not boasting of anything. Because the only essential is “your life with the Lord”. In this regard, Francis proffered a few questions to ask ourselves: “How do I pray? How is my life in regard to works of mercy? Do I visit the sick?”. Thus, one must get to the hard facts, look at “reality”. And “this is why Jesus tells us that we must build our house, that is to say our Christian life, upon the rock, on the truth”. Instead, “vain people build their house upon the sand and that house falls, that Christian life falls, it slips, because it is incapable of resisting temptation”.

Today, the Pope recalled, “so many Christians live for appearances”. And “their life seems like a soap bubble”, which is “pretty, it’s colourful, but it lasts for a second and then” it’s over. “Even when we see some funeral monuments”, he continued, “we think this is vanity, because the truth is a return to bare earth, as the Servant of God Paul VI said”. After all, “the bare earth is waiting for us, this is our final truth”. However, the Pope added, “in the meantime, do I boast or do I do something? Do I do good? Do I seek God? Do I pray?”. This is why one must aim for “things of substance”. Instead, “vanity is a liar, it’s fanciful, it deceives itself, it deceives the vain person: first he pretends to be, but in the end he believes to be what he says. He believes it, poor thing”.

And this is precisely what happened to Herod the Tetrarch, the Pope explained, referring to the passage in the day’s liturgy from the Gospel according to Luke (9:7-9): “When Jesus appeared, [Herod] was perplexed. In his imagination he thought: ‘But could this be John, whom I beheaded?’

Could it be another?”. Herod’s reaction shows us that “vanity sows cruel unrest, it takes away peace”. Thus, vanity “is like those people who wear too much makeup and then are afraid to get rained on because all that makeup will wash off”. This is why “vanity does not give us peace: only the truth gives us peace”.

Therefore, Francis advised, “let us consider today Jesus’ counsel to build our life upon the rock. He is the rock. The only rock is Jesus!”. But “let us think about this proposal of the devil, of the demon, who also tempted Jesus with vanity in the desert”. The devil proposed, “come with me, let’s go to the temple, let’s make a spectacle: throw yourself off and everyone will believe in you”. The devil truly served Jesus “vanity on a platter”.

For all these reasons, the Pope stated, vanity “is a very serious spiritual illness”. It is significant, he added, that “the Egyptian desert fathers said vanity is a temptation that we must fight against throughout all of life, because it always returns to us to strip away the truth”. And “to explain this they used to say: it’s like an onion, you take it and begin to peel it. You shed a layer of vanity today, a bit of vanity tomorrow” and so it goes, “throughout all of life, peeling vanity to defeat it”. This way “in the end you are content: I shed vanity, I peeled the onion. But the odour stays on your hands”.

Francis concluded the meditation by asking the Lord in prayer for “the grace to not be vain” but rather “to be true, with the truth of reality and of the Gospel”.