



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

As if they don't exist

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(by *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly ed. in English, n. 13, 31 March 2017)

The homeless, the new poor who can't pay the rent, the unemployed and children who beg on the streets, who are looked down upon because they belong to "that ethnic group that steals" are as much a part of today's city landscape as are "a statue, a bus stop, a post office". Pope Francis referred to this growing class of poverty-stricken people in his homily on Thursday morning, 16 March, observing that they are all too often treated with the same indifference, as if they did not exist — as if theirs were a "normal" situation which fails to move the heart. But if we ignore their plight, the Pope warned, we risk slipping "from sin into corruption" for which there is no remedy. In short, the Pontiff stressed, despite seeing images on tv and in newspapers of children killed by a bomb dropped on a hospital or a school, it is as if we think it suffices to recite "a Hail Mary and an Our Father" and continue on "living as if it were nothing".

Pointing to the beginning antiphon from Psalm 139[138] (23-24), the Pope said "we prayed: 'Search me, O God, and know my heart! ... See if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting'". Because, he explained, "we can live a life of lies, of appearances: it seems one way but reality is another". Precisely "for this reason we ask the Lord to search for the truth of our life: and if I live a life of lies, that he take me on the path of life, of true life".

“This prayer”, Francis said, “is in harmony with what the prophet Jeremiah tells us in the first reading” (17:5-10), offering “these two options that are pillars of life: ‘Cursed is the man who trusts in man; blessed the man who trusts in the Lord’”. Therefore, “cursed and blessed”. On one hand, we are presented with “‘the man who trusts in man, and makes flesh his arm’, that is, in the things that he can manage: in vanity, pride, in wealth, in himself”, and “he feels as if he were a god; his ‘heart turns away from the Lord’”. And this “turning away from the Lord ‘shall not see any good come’”, wrote the prophet Jeremiah, who said the man will be “like a shrub in the desert”, that is “fruitless; he will be barren: everything ends with him, he will leave no life; that life ends with his death, because his trust was placed in himself”.

Instead, the Pope stressed, “blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord”, he said, repeating Jeremiah’s words. That man “trusts the Lord, clings to the Lord, allows himself to be led by the Lord”. Jeremiah writes that he who trusts in the Lord will be “like a tree planted by water that sends out its roots by the stream and does not fear when heat comes”. Hence, he will be “fruitful” whereas the one who trusts in himself “will be ‘like a shrub in the desert’: sterile”.

Here, explained Francis, we see that “this option — out of these two ways of life that become pillars of life — comes from the heart: the fruitfulness of the man who trusts in the Lord and the fruitlessness of the man who trusts in himself, in his possessions, in his world, in his fantasies or even in his riches, in his power”. Jeremiah does not fail to warn us: “be careful: do not trust your heart; ‘the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt’”. Therefore, the Pope stressed, “our heart betrays us if we are not careful, if we are not constantly vigilant, if we are lazy, if we live somewhat lightheartedly, looking only at things”. And “this path is a dangerous path; it is a slippery path: when I trust only in my heart — because it is unreliable — it is dangerous”.

This, the Pope continued, referring to the passage from Luke (16:19-31), was exactly what “happened to the rich man of the Gospel: when a person lives in his closed environment, breathes in that air of his possessions, his satisfaction, vanity, of feeling safe, and he trusts only in himself, he loses direction; he loses the compass and does not know where the boundaries are”. His problem is that “he lives only there; he does not come out of himself”.

It is the account in Luke’s Gospel, in fact, in which Jesus recounts to the Pharisees the story of the rich man who “lived well; he lacked nothing; he had many friends”, because “when there is money there are friends, and when there’s no money there are no parties; friends fly away, they leave”. So that man “was always with friends, at parties”, but at his doorstep lay “that poor man”. But the rich man “knew who that poor man was — he knew! Because later, when he speaks with father Abraham, he says: ‘send me Lazarus’”. Therefore, “he even knew his name but he did not care”. Was he therefore “a sinful man? Yes. But one can return from sin; one asks for forgiveness and the Lord forgives”.

As for that rich man, however, “the heart led him to a path of death, to the point of no return. There

is a point, there is a moment, there is a limit from which it is difficult to turn back”. And it is precisely the point at which “sin transforms into corruption”.

Thus, the Pope explained, that rich man “was not a sinner; he was corrupt because he knew of the many miseries, but he was happy there and nothing mattered to him”. And here, the Pope returned to Jeremiah’s words: “Cursed is the man who trusts in himself, who trusts in his heart; ‘the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt!’; and when you are on that path of sickness, it will be difficult for you to heal”.

At this point, Francis proposed an examination of conscience: “Today, I will ask a question of all of us: what do we feel in the heart when we are walking along the street and we see the homeless, we see children on their own, begging?”. Perhaps we think “they are from that ethnic group that steals”. The Pope challenged the faithful to ask themselves “what do I feel” when I see “the homeless, the poor, the abandoned, even the well dressed homeless who do not have money to pay rent — why don’t they have work?”. And all of this, the Pope said, “is part of the panorama, of the landscape of a city: like a statue, a bus stop, a post office”. But “are the homeless also part of the cityscape? Is this normal? Be careful, let us be attentive! When these things sound normal in our heart”, when we say to ourselves, “‘ah yes, this is how life is: I eat; drink; and to relieve a bit of the sense of guilt, I give a token offering and go on’ — this path is not good”.

Thinking this way, the Pope stressed, means “we are, in that moment, on that slippery path” that leads “from sin to corruption”. Therefore, the Pontiff continued, we should ask ourselves: “what do I feel when, on the television news, in the newspapers, I see that a bomb has fallen there, on a hospital, on a school, and many children have died, poor people?”. Perhaps “I say a Hail Mary, an Our Father, for them and I continue to live as if nothing has happened”. Instead, Francis suggested that we ask ourselves if such human drama has “entered my heart” or if I am “like that rich man” the Gospel speaks about, whose heart never welcomed Lazarus — Lazarus, for whom “the dogs had more pity” than the rich man did. And, “if I were like that rich man, I would be on the path from sin to corruption”.

Returning to Psalm 139[138] for his concluding thoughts, Pope Francis said that this is why “we ask the Lord: “‘Search me, O God, and know my heart! ... And see if there be any wicked way in me’; see if my way is wrong, if I am on the slippery path from sin to corruption from which there is no return”. Because, the Pope added, “usually, if contrite, the sinner comes back; it is less likely for the corrupt person because he is closed within himself. Therefore, we are challenged to pray today: “‘Search me, O God, and know my heart!’; and help me understand which path I am on, which path I am following”.

At the conclusion of the liturgical celebration, the Pope offered a special greeting to Cardinal Angelo Comastri and Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe, who concelebrated with him on the occasion of their 50th anniversary of ordination to the priesthood.

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