

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE



BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 180329c

Thursday 29.03.2018

Holy Mass “in Coena Domini” in “Regina Coeli” Prison, Rome

Homily of the Holy Father

Concluding words of the Holy Father

At 15.45 this afternoon, *Thursday of Holy Week*, the Holy Father Francis left Santa Marta for the *Regina Coeli* Prison in Rome.

Upon arrival, at around 16.00, the Pope met with sick inmates in the infirmary. He then presided at the celebration of Mass in *Coena Domini*, the beginning of the Paschal Triduum, and left as gift the altar upon which he celebrated.

During the Rite the Holy Father washed the feet of twelve detainees from seven different countries: four Italians, two Filipinos, two Moroccans, one Moldavian, one Colombian, one Nigerian and one from Sierra Leone. Eight of them were Catholics, whereas two were Muslims, two Orthodox, and one Buddhist.

Finally, before returning to the Vatican, he met with several inmates from the Eighth Section.

The following is the Pope’s off-the-cuff homily, pronounced after the proclamation of the Holy Gospel and the words at the end of the visit:

Homily of the Holy Father

Jesus finishes His speech by saying, “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (*Jn* 13: 15). Washing the feet. Feet, in that time, were washed by slaves: it was a slave’s task. People walked along

the street, there was no asphalt, there were no cobbles; in that time there was the dust of the street, and the people had dirty feet. And upon entering the house, there were slaves who washed their feet. It was a job for slaves. But it was a service: a service provided by slaves. And Jesus wished to perform this service, to set us an example of how we should serve each other.

Once, when they were walking, two of the disciples who wanted to get ahead had asked Jesus if they could occupy important roles, one on his right and one on his left (cf. *Mk* 10: 35-45). And Jesus looked at them with love – Jesus always looked with love – and said: “You don’t know what you are asking” (v. 38). The heads of nations – says Jesus – command, are served, and they live well (cf. 42). Let us think of that age of kings and emperors who were so cruel, who made slaves serve them. ... But among you, Jesus says, it must not be the same: whoever wants to command must serve. The head must be your servant (cf. 43). Jesus upturns the historical and cultural tendency of that time – and also of today – he who commands, to be a good head, wherever he may be, must serve. I often think – not at this time because anyone who is still alive has the opportunity to change their life and we cannot judge, but let us think of history – if so many kings, emperors, heads of State, had understood this teaching of Jesus and instead of commanding, of being cruel, of killing people, had done this, how many wars could have been avoided! Service: truly there are people who do not facilitate this attitude, arrogant people, hateful people, people who perhaps wish ill; but we are called to serve them more. And there are also people who suffer, who are discarded by society, at least for a time, and Jesus goes there to say to them: you are important for me. Jesus comes to serve us, and the signal that Jesus serves us today here, in the Regina Coeli prison, is that He wanted to choose twelve of you, like the twelve apostles, to wash your feet. Jesus takes a risk on each one of us. Know this: Jesus is called Jesus, He is not called Pontius Pilate. Jesus does not wash His hands: He knows only how to risk! Look at this image, so beautiful: Jesus stooping among the thorns, risking to injure Himself to save the lost sheep.

Today I, who am a sinner like you, but I represent Jesus, I am an ambassador of Jesus; today, when I bow before each one of you, think: “Jesus risked in that man, a sinner, to come to me and to tell me that He loves me”. This is service, this is Jesus: He never abandons us, He never tires of forgiving us. He loves us so much. Look at how He takes risks, Jesus!

And so, with these sentiments, let us go ahead with this ceremony which is symbolic. Before giving us His body and His blood, Jesus risked for each one of us, and He risks in service because He loves us greatly.

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During the gesture of the exchange of peace, the Holy Father pronounced the following words:

And now, all of us – I am sure that all of us – have the wish to be at peace with everyone. But in our heart very often there are conflicting sentiments. It is easy to be at peace with those whom we love and with those who do good to us; but it is not easy to be at peace with those who have wronged us, who do not wish us well, with whom we are in enmity. In silence, a moment, each one of you think of those who wish us well and to whom we wish well; and also, each one of us, think of those who do not wish us well, and to whom we do not wish well, and also – rather – those we would like to take revenge on. And let us ask the Lord, in silence, the grace of giving to all, good and bad, the gift of peace.

Concluding words of the Holy Father

Words of the Holy Father in response to the greeting of the prison director and an inmate, at the end of the visit to the Regina Coeli Prison:

You spoke of a new outlook: of renewing one’s outlook ... This is good, because at my age, for example, cataracts come, and we do not really see reality: next year we will have to carry out the operation. But this

happens with the soul: life's work, fatigue, mistakes, disappointments obscure the gaze, the gaze of the soul. And this is why what you said is true: take advantage of opportunities to renew your outlook. And as I said in Saint Peter's Square [General Audience yesterday] in many villages, but also in my land, when the bells of the Resurrection of the Lord are heard, mothers and grandmothers take the children to wash their eyes so that they look to the risen Christ with hope. Never tire of renewing your gaze, of performing that cataract operation on the soul, daily. But always renew the look. It takes a lot of effort.

You all know of the half-full bottle of wine: if I look at the empty half, life is bad, it's ugly, but if I look at the full half, I still have some to drink. The look that is open to hope, a word you said and that she [the director] said; and she repeated it several times. One can not conceive of a detention centre like this without hope. Guests are here to learn or grow by "sowing hope": there is no just punishment – just! – that is not open to hope. A punishment that is not open to hope is not Christian, it is not human!

There are difficulties in life, bad things, sadness – one thinks of his own family, mother, father, wife, husband, children ... it is ugly, that sadness. But do not let yourself get down: no, no. I am here, but to reintegrate myself, renewed. And this is hope. Sow hope. Always, always. Your job is this: helping to sow the hope of reintegration, and this will do good for everyone. Always. Every punishment must be open to the horizon of hope. For this reason, the death penalty is neither human nor Christian. Every punishment must be open to hope, to reintegration, also to offer lived experience for the good of other people.

The water of resurrection, new outlook, hope: this what I wish to you. I know that you have worked so hard to prepare for this visit, even painting the walls: thank you. It is a sign of benevolence and welcome for me, and I thank you so much. I am close to you, I pray for you, and pray for me and do not forget: the water that makes our outlook new, and hope.
