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Chrism Mass in the Vatican Basilica

At 9.30 this morning, Holy Thursday, in the Vatican Basilica, the Holy Father Francis presided over Chrism Mass, the liturgy celebrated on this day in all the Cathedral Churches.

The Chrism Mass was concelebrated by the Holy Father with the cardinals, bishops and priests (diocesan and religious) present in Rome.

During the Eucharistic celebration, the priests renewed the promises made at the moment of their ordination; this was followed by the blessing of the oil for the sick, the oil for catechumens, and the Chrism.

The following is the homily delivered by the Pope during the proclamation of the Holy Gospel:

Homily of the Holy Father

In the reading from the Prophet Isaiah that we have heard, the Lord makes a promise full of hope, one that concerns us at first hand: “You shall be called priests of the Lord; they shall speak of you as the ministers of our God... I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them” (61:6.8). Being priests, dear brothers, is a grace, a very great grace, yet it is not primarily a grace for us, but for our people.[1] The fact that the Lord chooses, from among his flock, some who devote themselves exclusively to the care of his flock as fathers and shepherds is a great gift for our people. The Lord himself pays the priest’s salary: “I will faithfully give them their recompense” (*Is* 61:8). And, as we all know, he is a good paymaster, even if he has his own particular way of doing things, like paying the last ones before first ones: this is his way.

The reading from the Book of Revelation tells us what the Lord’s recompense is. It is his love and the unconditional forgiveness of our sins at the price of his blood shed on the Cross: “He loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father” (1:5-6). There is no recompense greater than friendship with Jesus, do not forget this. There is no peace greater than his forgiveness, and we all know that. There is no greater price than his precious Blood, and we must not allow it to

be devalued by unworthy conduct.

If we think about it, dear brother priests, the Lord is inviting us to be faithful to him, to be faithful to his covenant, and to let ourselves be loved and forgiven by him. They are invitations addressed to us, so that in this way we can serve, with a clear conscience, the holy and faithful people of God. Our people deserve this and they need it. The Gospel of Luke tells us that, after Jesus read the passage from the prophet Isaiah in the presence of his townspeople and sat down, “the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him” (4:20). The Book of Revelation also speaks to us today of eyes fixed on Jesus. It speaks of the irresistible attraction of the crucified and risen Lord that leads us to acknowledge and worship him: “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, everyone who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. The ultimate grace, at the return of the risen Lord, will be that of immediate recognition. We will see him and his wounds. We will recognize who he is, and who we are, as poor sinners.

“Fixing our eyes on Jesus” is a grace that we, as priests, need to cultivate. At the end of the day, we do well to gaze upon the Lord, and to let him gaze upon our hearts and the hearts of all those whom we have encountered. Not as an accounting of our sins, but as a loving act of contemplation, in which we review our day with the eyes of Jesus, seeing its graces and gifts, and giving thanks for all that he has done for us. But also to set before him our temptations, so as to acknowledge them and reject them. As we can see, this requires knowing what is pleasing to the Lord and what it is that he is asking of us here and now, at this point in our lives.

And perhaps, if we meet his gracious gaze, he will also help us to show him our idols. The idols that, like Rachel, we have hidden under the folds of our cloak (cf. *Gen 31: 34-35*). Allowing the Lord to see those hidden idols – we all have them; all of us! – and to strengthen us against them and takes away their power.

The Lord’s gaze makes us see that, through them we are really glorifying ourselves[2], for there, in those spaces we mark out as exclusively ours, the devil insinuates himself with his poison. He not only makes us self-complacent, giving free rein to one passion or nurturing another, but he also leads us to *replace* with those idols *the presence of the divine Persons, the Father, the Son and the Spirit* who dwell within us. This happens. Even though we might tell ourselves that we know perfectly well the difference between God and an idol, in practice we take space away from the Trinity in order to give it to the devil, in a kind of oblique worship. The worship of one who quietly yet constantly listens to his talk and consumes his products, so that in the end not even a little corner remains for God. He is like that, he works quietly and slowly. In another context I spoke about “educated” demons, those that Jesus said are worse than the one who was cast out. They are “polite”, they ring the bell, they enter and gradually take over the house. We must be careful, these are our idols.

There is something about idols that is personal. When we fail to unmask them, when we do not let Jesus show us that in them we are wrongly and unnecessarily seeking ourselves, we make room for the Evil One. We need to remember that the devil demands that we do his will and that we serve him, but he does not always ask us to serve him and worship him constantly; but beware, he is a great diplomat. Receiving our worship from time to time is enough for him to prove that he is our real master and that he can feel like a god in our life and in our heart.

Having said that, in this Chrism Mass, I want to share with you three spaces of hidden idolatry in which the Evil One uses our idols to weaken us in our vocation as shepherds and, little by little, *separate us from the benevolent and loving presence of Jesus, the Spirit and the Father.*

One space of hidden idolatry opens up wherever there is *spiritual worldliness*, which is “a proposal of life, a culture, a culture of the ephemeral, of appearances, of the cosmetic”. [3] Its criterion is triumphalism, a triumphalism without the cross. Jesus prayed that the Father would defend us against this culture of worldliness. This temptation of glory without the cross runs contrary to the very person of the Lord, it runs contrary to Jesus, who humbled himself in the incarnation and, as a sign of contradiction, is our sole remedy against every idol. Being poor with Christ who was poor and “chose to be poor”: this is the mindset of Love; nothing else. In today’s Gospel, we see how the Lord chose a simple synagogue in the small village where he spent most of his life, to proclaim the same message he will proclaim at the end of time, when he will come in his glory, surrounded by

angels. Our eyes must be fixed on Christ, on the concrete reality of his history with me, now, even as they will be then. The worldly attitude of seeking our own glory robs us of the presence of Jesus, humble and humiliated, the Lord who draws near to everyone, the Christ who suffers with all who suffer, who is worshiped by our people, who know who his true friends are. A worldly priest is nothing more than a clericalized pagan.

A second space of hidden idolatry opens up with the kind of pragmatism where *numbers become the most important thing*. Those who cherish this hidden idol can be recognized by their love for *statistics*, numbers that can depersonalize every discussion and appeal to the majority as the definitive criterion for discernment; this is not good. This cannot be the sole method or criterion for the Church of Christ. Persons cannot be “numbered”, and God does not “measure out” his gift of the Spirit (cf. *Jn 3:34*). In this fascination with and love of numbers, we are really seeking ourselves, pleased with the control offered us by this way of thinking, unconcerned with individual faces and far from love. One feature of the great saints is that they know how to step back in order to leave room completely for God. This stepping back, this forgetting of ourselves and wanting to be forgotten by everyone else, is the mark of the Spirit, who is in some sense “faceless” – the Spirit is “faceless” – simply because he is completely Love, illuminating the image of the Son and, in him, that of the Father. The idolatry of numbers tries to replace the person of the Holy Spirit, who loves to keep hidden – because he is “faceless” – it tries to make everything “apparent”, albeit in a way abstract and reduced to numbers, without a real incarnation.

A third space of hidden idolatry, related to the second, comes from *functionalism*. This can be alluring; many people “are more enthusiastic about the roadmap than about the road”. The functionalist mindset has short shrift for mystery; it aims at efficiency. Little by little, this idol replaces the Father’s presence within us. The first idol replaces the Son’s presence, the second one the Spirit’s, and the third one the Father’s. Our Father is the creator, but not simply a creator who makes things “function”. He “creates” us, as our Father, with tender love, caring for his creatures and working to make men and women ever more free. “Functionaries” take no delight in the graces that the Spirit pours out on his people, from which they too can “be nourished” like the worker who earns his wage. The priest with a functionalist mindset has his own nourishment, which is his ego. In functionalism, we set aside the worship of the Father in the small and great matters of our life and take pleasure in the efficiency of our own programmes. As David did when, tempted by Satan, he insisted on carrying out the census (cf. *1 Chron 21:1*). These are the lovers of the route plan and the itinerary, and not of the journey itself.

In these last two spaces of hidden idolatry (the pragmatism of numbers and functionalism), we replace hope, which is the space of encounter with God, with empirical results. This shows an attitude of vainglory on the part of the shepherd, an attitude that weakens the union of his people with God and forges a new idol based on numbers and programmes: the idol of “my power, our power”, [4] of our programmes, of our numbers and pastoral plans. Concealing these idols (as Rachel did), and not knowing how to unmask them in our daily lives, detracts from our fidelity to our priestly covenant and makes our personal relationship with the Lord become lukewarm. But what does this Bishop want? Instead of talking about Jesus he is talking about today’s idols. Someone can think like that...

Dear brothers, Jesus is the only “way” to avoid being mistaken in knowing what we feel and where our heart is leading us. He is the only way that leads to proper discernment, as we measure ourselves against him each day. It is as if, even now, he is seated in our parish church and tells us that today all we have heard is now fulfilled. Jesus Christ, as a sign of contradiction – which is not always something harsh and painful, for mercy and, even more, tender love, are themselves signs of contradiction – Jesus Christ, I repeat, forces these idols to show themselves, so that we can see their presence, their roots and the ways they operate, and allow the Lord to destroy them. This is the proposal: allow the Lord to destroy those hidden idols. We should keep these things in mind and be attentive, lest the weeds of these idols that we were able to hide in the folds of our hearts may spring up anew.

I want to end by asking Saint Joseph, as the chaste father, free of hidden idols, to liberate us from every form of possessiveness, for possessiveness is the fertile soil in which these idols grow. May he also obtain for us the grace to persevere in the arduous task of discerning those idols that we all too often conceal or that conceal themselves. Let us ask too, whenever we wonder if we might do things better, that he intercede for us, so that the Spirit may enlighten our judgement, even as he did when Joseph was tempted to set Mary aside “quietly” (*lathra*). In this way, with nobility of heart, we may be able to subordinate to charity what we have learned by

law.[5]

[1] For the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood. The Lord has chosen certain men “in order that they might exercise the priestly office publically *on behalf of men and women* in the name of Christ” (SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree on the Life and Ministry of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2; cf. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 10). “Ministers, invested with a sacred power, are at the service of their brothers and sisters” (*Lumen Gentium*, 18).

[2] Cf. General Audience, 1 August 2018.

[3] *Homily*, Mass at the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, 16 May 2020.

[4] J. M. BERGOGLIO, *Meditaciones para religiosos*, Bilbao, Mensajero, 2014, 145.

[5] Cf. Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde*, 4, note 18.
