



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAЕ

Nostalgia for God

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(by *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly ed. in English, n. 41, 9 October 2015)

It is “nostalgia for God” that leads us to find our true “identity” in him. Strengthened by this awareness, which also matured throughout the history of the people of Israel, the Pope advised that we look inside ourselves to ensure that the “nostalgia” in our heart is never quelled.

On Thursday morning, during the Mass celebrated at Santa Marta in memory of St Thérèse of the Child Jesus, the Pope referred to the First Reading, taken from the Book of Nehemiah (8:1-4, 5-6, 7-12), to remind participants that the text presents the conclusion of a history that had lasted for decades: “the people of Israel had been deported to Babylon, they were far from Jerusalem, and lived there for years, decades”. And “so many of them had become accustomed to that life and had almost forgotten their homeland”. But “there was something inside that always reminded them, and when that moment of remembrance came, they prayed with the words of the Psalm: ‘Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you’”.

However, Francis continued, “it was an impossible, distant memory, a past that would never return”. Until “Nehemiah, an Israelite very close to the king, managed to get permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild it, because it had been completely destroyed, all in ruins”. Thus “began the years-long history of the return to Jerusalem”.

“It is a difficult history”, the Pope said, “because they had to transport the wood, then find the stones to build the walls, but, even there, there were some who didn’t want the new walls and who destroyed them”. Therefore, those “who wanted to rebuild the city kept watch during the night to protect the walls: and so it went”. Then, continued the Pope, retracing the Reading, “they destroyed the altars to idols and built the altar to God, the temple, slowly”. Indeed, “it wasn’t a matter of days, but a matter of years”. And “eventually this day that we heard about today arrived: they found the Law, the book of the Law”.

“Nehemiah asked Ezra the scribe to read it before the people, all the people, in front of them in the square”. Thus, “Ezra the scribe, with the help of other scribes, read the Law and the people began to feel that the memory they had was real, the memory that kept them from singing the songs of Jerusalem when they were deported: ‘But how will we sing the songs in a foreign land?’”. That people, Francis explained, “felt what the Psalm so elegantly said: ‘When the Lord restored the fate of Jerusalem, our mouth broadened in smile’”. This was truly “a joyful people”.

The Pope pointed out a “curious” fact: the people of Israel “were joyous but they wept, and they heard the Word of God; they had joy, but also tears, everything together”. How can this be explained? It’s simple, he said. “The people had not only found their city, the city of their birth, the city of God: the people, in hearing the Law, found their identity, and this is why they were joyful and wept”. Thus Nehemiah and the Levites, together, exhorted the people with these words: “This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep”. Indeed, the Pope recalled, it’s true that “all the people wept as they listened to the words of the Law: but they wept for joy, they wept because they had found their identity, they had rediscovered the identity that had been lost somewhat in the years of deportation”.

For the people of Israel it was “a long journey”. Thus Nehemiah advised them: “do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength”. It is “the joy that the Lord gives when we find our identity”. However, “our identity gets lost on the way, it gets lost in the many deportations or self-deportations, when we build a nest here, a nest there... and not in the house of the Lord”. Here then, is the importance of “finding one’s true identity”.

The question then, Francis asked, is how to go about finding one’s proper identity. “There is a thread that leads us there: there is a homesickness, a nostalgia for your home”, such that “when you have lost what was yours, your home, you have this nostalgia, and this nostalgia leads you home again”. This is just as it was for the people of Israel, who “with this nostalgia, felt they were happy and wept with joy over this, because nostalgia for their true identity led them to find it”. And this was “a grace from God”.

Calling for an examination of conscience, Francis proposed this reflection: “If we, for example, are filled with food, we are not hungry; if we are comfortable, at peace where we are, we don’t need to go elsewhere. I ask myself, and it would be good for all of us to ask ourselves today: am I at

peace, content, in need of nothing — I'm speaking spiritually — in my heart? Has my nostalgia been quelled?"

The Pontiff asked us to look again at the happy people of Israel, who were both "weeping and joyful", because "a heart that does not have nostalgia does not know joy". Indeed, "joy really is our strength: the joy of God". Because "a heart that doesn't know what nostalgia is cannot celebrate, and this whole journey which began years ago ends in a celebration".

The passage from the Book of Nehemiah ends with the image of all the people who "went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them". They had found, in other words, "what nostalgia made them feel" in order to "go forward". In conclusion the Pope recommended that everyone ask him- or herself "how is our nostalgia for God: are we content, are we happy like this or do we, every day, have this desire to go forward?". He then prayed "that the Lord give us this grace: that never, never ever may nostalgia for God be quelled in our heart".