



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

New wineskins

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A Christian who hides behind the notion that “this is how it’s always been done...” is committing a sin, becomes idolatrous and disobedient, and lives a “patched up, half-and-half life”, because his heart is closed to the “newness of the Holy Spirit”. The invitation to free oneself from the customary in order to make room for “God’s surprises” was offered by Pope Francis during Mass at Santa Marta on Monday morning.

In the First Reading, taken from the First Book of Samuel (15:16-23), the Pope began, “we heard that Saul the king was rejected by God for not obeying: the Lord told him that he would win in battle, in war, but that everything had to be utterly destroyed”. But Saul “did not obey”.

Thus, “when the prophet rebukes him for this and then in the name of God rejects him from being king of Israel”, Saul — the passage continues — “gives an explanation: ‘I have heard the voice of the people who took the best of this livestock to sacrifice to the Lord’”.

“It is a good thing to sacrifice”, Francis explained, “but the Lord had ordered, he had given a mandate to do something else”. Thus Samuel says to Saul: “Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord?”. Therefore, the Pope affirmed,

“obedience goes further” and surpasses even Saul’s words of justification: “I listened to the people and the people told me: this is how it’s always been done! The most valuable things go to the service of the Lord, either in the temple or as sacrifices. This is how it’s always been done!”.

Thus, “the king, who had to change this notion of ‘this is how it’s always been done...’ says to Samuel: ‘I feared the people’”. Saul “was afraid” and this is why “he allowed life to continue contrary to the Lord’s will”.

It is the same attitude — the Pope continued, referring to the day’s passage from Mark (2:18-22) — that “Jesus teaches in the Gospel, when the doctors of the law rebuke him because his disciples do not fast: ‘This is how it’s always been done. Why don’t your [disciples] fast?’. Jesus responds with this principle of life: ‘No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; if he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; so new wine is for fresh skins’”.

Hence Francis asked, “what does this mean, that the law has changed? No!”. It means, rather, “that the law is at the service of man, that it is at the service of God, and for this reason man must have an open heart”. The attitude of those who say “this is how it’s always been done...”, in reality, is born from “a closed heart”. Instead, “Jesus told us: ‘I will send the Holy Spirit and he will lead you to the full truth’”. Thus, “if your heart is closed to the newness of the Holy Spirit, you will never reach the full truth”. Additionally, “your Christian life will be a half-and-half life, a patched up life, mended with new things but on a structure that is not open to the Lord’s voice: a closed heart, because you are not capable of changing the wineskins”.

This was precisely, the Pontiff explained, “the sin of Saul the king, for which he was rejected”. And it is also “the sin of many Christians who hold onto what has always been done and do not allow the wineskins to be changed”. Thus they end up living “a halfway, patched up, mended, meaningless life”.

So, the Pope asked, “why does this happen? Why is it so serious, why does the Lord reject Saul and then choose another king?”. The answer is given by Samuel, when “he explains a closed heart, a heart that does not listen to the Lord’s voice, that is not open to the newness of the Lord, to the Spirit who always surprises us”. One who has such a heart, Samuel affirms, “is a sinner”. “For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry”. Thus, Francis said, “Christians who are obstinate, saying ‘this is how it’s always been done, this is the way, this is the path’, are sinning: the sin of divination”. It is “as if they were to go to a palm reader”. In the end, “what has been said and what doesn’t change — by me and my closed heart” — becomes “more important” than “the Word of the Lord”. This “is also the sin of idolatry: stubbornness. The Christian who insists, sins. The sin of idolatry”.

The question to ask with regard to this truth is: “What is the path?”. Francis suggested that we “open our heart to the Holy Spirit, discern what is the will of God”. It’s true, “always, after battles, the people took everything for sacrifices to the Lord, also for their own benefit, also gems for the temple”. And “it was customary, at the time of Jesus, for good Israelites to fast”. However, the Pope explained, “there is another reality: there is the Holy Spirit who leads us to the full truth”. And “this is why he needs open hearts, hearts that are not obstinate in the sin of idolizing themselves”, believing that what’s “most important” is “what I think” and not “the surprise of the Holy Spirit”.

The Pope then remarked that this “is the message that the Church gives us today: which Jesus says so firmly: ‘New wine in new wineskins!’”. Because, Francis reiterated, “even customs must be renewed in the newness of the Holy Spirit, in the surprises of God”. Before continuing with the celebration, Francis expressed the hope that “the Lord give us the grace of an open heart, of a heart open to the voice of the Holy Spirit, which can discern what must not change because it is fundamental from what has to change in order to be able to receive the newness of the Holy Spirit”.