



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

Faith is concrete

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What does it mean to truly experience Easter; what is the “Easter spirit?”. The question is essential, because for a Christian there is a risk of “idealization” and of forgetting that “our faith is concrete”. In the chapel at Santa Marta on Monday morning, 24 April, in the first Mass Pope Francis celebrated after the Easter celebrations, he outlined the course to be followed: “to go along the paths of the Holy Spirit without compromises”, witnessing to the truth with courage and frankness.

Understanding this life plan requires a “passage of mentality”, freeing oneself from the snares of “realism” and adhering to the “freedom” of the Spirit. This is what Jesus explained to Nicodemus in the well-known Gospel narrative of the nighttime visit (Jn 3:1-8), which the Pontiff analyzed in the day’s liturgy.

“This Pharisee”, the Pope said, “was a good man. He was restless; he did not understand. His heart was in its darkest hour”. However, Nicodemus’ darkest hour was “different from that of Judas, because this dark hour led him to draw near to Jesus”, while that of Judas led him “to distance himself”. When Nicodemus went to Jesus to “ask for explanations”, he received a response that “he did not understand”. It almost seemed as if “Jesus wanted to complicate things

or embarrass him". Indeed, Jesus replied: "truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God". Nicodemus asked: "How can a man be born anew?". It seemed, Francis noted, "rather ironic, but it is not so". It is instead the expression of great interior torment. Thus, Jesus explained that it entailed "a passage from one mentality to another", and "with much patience, with much love, He helped this man of good will in this passage".

The Pontiff reflected on Jesus' response, asking, "what does it mean to be 'born of the Spirit'? What is the meaning" of the passage: "'you must be born anew.' The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit"? The Pope then emphasized a perceptible "air of freedom" contained in this message.

It is a difficult discourse, however, and "in order to better understand it", the Pope suggested, "the first reading enlightens us". In the day's reading from the Acts of the Apostles (4:23-31), there is indeed "the finale of a narrative that the liturgy proposed throughout Holy Week. The story of the healing, by Peter and John, of the lame man who had been brought each day to the Temple Gate called 'Beautiful', to ask alms". The reading of this episode sheds light on the discussion with Nicodemus, Francis explained. He pointed out that "all the people were there at Solomon's gate"; they had seen and were astonished. It was that very "sentiment — more than a sentiment: that state of mind which makes the Lord present in us. Astonishment. The encounter with the Lord leads to astonishment".

In response to this, the leaders, the high priests, the doctors of the law, were "scandalized" and, knowing that the miracle had been performed in public, asked themselves: "What do we do?". The same thing happens, the Pontiff stated, when Jesus heals the man who had been born blind. Then, those who were present asked: "What can we do to cover this up? Because people have seen, people believe, we have proof.... How can this be hidden?". Indeed, they had seen that lame man who, according to the narrative, "danced for joy so as to make them understand that Jesus had healed him". The doctors of the law agreed to call the two Apostles and "to tell them to speak no more, to preach no more". Peter, who "had denied Jesus three times", responded: "No! 'We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard'. And thus, we shall continue".

This is the detail that clarifies everything, "two words" that John later uses to begin the first letter: "what we have seen and heard". It is, the Pope indicated, a matter of "concreteness. The concreteness of a fact. The concreteness of faith. The concreteness of the incarnation of the Word".

In this context, the Pontiff continued, "the leaders want to enter negotiations in order to reach compromises". But the Apostles "do not want compromises. They have courage. They have frankness, the frankness of the Spirit". It is a "frankness that means speaking openly, with courage". Therefore, Francis explained, this is "the point: the concreteness of faith". A conclusion

which involves every Christian. Indeed, Francis recalled, “at times we forget that our faith is concrete: the Word became flesh, he did not become an idea: he became flesh”. For this reason, “when we recite the Creed”, everything we say is “concrete: ‘I believe in God the Father, creator of heaven and earth; I believe in Jesus Christ, who was born, who died...’. They are all concrete things. The Creed does not say: ‘I believe that I must do this, that I must do this’, or that ‘things are for these...’. No! They are concrete things”. And the “concreteness of faith” leads “to frankness, to witnessing to the point of martyrdom, which is contrary to compromises or the idealization of faith”. One might say that for those doctors of the law, “the Word did not become flesh: it became law”. For them it was only important to establish: “one must do this up to this point and no more; one must do this.... And thus they were trapped in this rationalistic mentality”. However, the Pope cautioned, this mentality “does not end with them”. In fact, many times in history, the Church “that condemned rationalism, enlightenment”, is also one that “fell into a theology of ‘can and cannot’, ‘up to this point, up to that point’, and forgot the strength, the freedom of the Spirit, this being born anew of the Spirit which gives you the freedom, the frankness of preaching, the message that Jesus Christ is Lord”.

According to this key understanding, the Pontiff emphasized, one can also understand “the history of persecution”. Indeed, the first reading states: “The kings of the earth set themselves in array, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord his Anointed — for truly in this city there were gathered together against thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel”.

Thus this lesson is still timely: “Let us ask the Lord for this experience of the Spirit who comes and goes and leads us forward, of the Spirit who gives us the anointing of faith, the anointing of the concreteness of faith”.

Thus, Jesus’ words to Nicodemus echo once again: “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit”. One who is born of the Spirit “hears the voice, follows the wind, follows the voice of the Spirit, not knowing where he will end up. Because he has chosen the option of the concreteness of faith and being born anew in the spirit”.

Thus, Pope Francis concluded with a prayer: “May the Lord give us all this Easter Spirit, to go along the paths of the Spirit without compromise, without rigidity, with the freedom to announce Jesus Christ as he has come: in the flesh”.
