



The Holy See

HOMILY OF HOLY FATHER FRANCIS ON THE OCCASION OF THE FEAST OF SAINT IGNATIUS

*Church of the Gesù, Rome
Wednesday, 31 July 2013*

In this Eucharist in which we are celebrating our Father, Ignatius of Loyola, in the light of the Readings we have heard I would like to suggest three simple thoughts, guided by three concepts: putting Christ and the Church at the centre; letting ourselves be won over by him in order to serve; feeling ashamed of our shortcomings and sins so as to be humble in his eyes and in those of our brethren.

1. Our Jesuit coat of arms is a monogram bearing the acronym of “*Iesus Hominum Salvator*” (IHS). Each one of you could say to me: we know that very well! But this coat of arms constantly reminds us of a reality we must never forget: the centrality of Christ, for each one of us and for the whole Society which St Ignatius wanted to call, precisely, “of Jesus” to indicate its point of reference. Moreover, at the beginning of the Spiritual Exercises we also place ourselves before Our Lord Jesus Christ, our Creator and Saviour (cf. *EE*, 6). And this brings us Jesuits and the whole Society to be “off-centre”, to stand before “Christ ever greater”, the “*Deus semper maior*”, the “*intimior intimo meo*”, who leads us continuously out of ourselves, leads us to a certain *kenosis*, “to give up self love, self-seeking and self-interest”; (*EE*, 189). The question: “is Christ the centre of my life? For us, for any one of us, the question do I truly put Christ at the centre of my life?” should not be taken for granted. Because there is always a temptation to think that we are at the centre; and when a Jesuit puts himself and not Christ at the centre he errs. In the first Reading Moses insistently repeats to the People that they should love the Lord and walk in his ways “for that means life to you” (cf. Dt 30:16, 20). Christ is our life! Likewise the centrality of Christ corresponds to the centrality of the Church: they are two focal points that cannot be separated: I cannot follow Christ except *in* the Church and *with* the Church. And in this case too we Jesuits — and the entire Society — are not at the centre, we are, so to speak, a corollary, we are at the service of Christ and of the Church, the Bride of Christ Our Lord, who is our holy Mother the hierarchical Church (cf.

EE, 353). Men rooted in and founded on the Church: this is what Jesus wants us to be. There can be no parallel or isolated path. Yes, ways of research, creative ways, this is indeed important: to move out to the periphery, the many peripheries. For this reason creativity is vital, but always in community, in the Church, with this belonging that gives us the courage to go ahead. Serving Christ is loving this actual Church, and serving her generously and in a spirit of obedience.

2. What road leads to living this double centrality? Let us look at the experience of St Paul which was also the experience of St Ignatius. In the Second Reading which we have just heard, the Apostle wrote: I press on toward the perfection of Christ, because "Christ Jesus has made me his own" (Phil 3:12). For Paul it happened on the road to Damascus, for Ignatius in the Loyola family home, but they have in common a fundamental point: they both let Christ make them his own. I seek Jesus, I serve Jesus because he sought me first, because I was won over by him: and this is the heart of our experience.

However he goes first, always. In Spanish there is very expressive word that explains it well: *EI nos "primerea"*, he "*precedes*" us. He is always first. When we arrive he is already there waiting for us. And here I would like to recall the meditation on the "Kingdom in the Second Week". Christ Our Lord, the eternal King, calls each one of us, saying: "to anyone, then, who chooses to join me, I offer nothing but a share in my hardships; but if he follows me in suffering he will assuredly follow me in glory" (*EE*, 95); to be won over by Christ to offer to this King our whole person and our every endeavour (cf. *EE*, 96); saying to the Lord that we intend to do our utmost for the more perfect service and greater praise of his Majesty, putting up with all injustice, all abuse, all poverty (cf. *EE*, 98). But at this moment my thoughts turn to our brother in Syria. Letting Christ make us his own always means straining forward to what lies ahead, to the goal of Christ (cf. Phil 3:14), and it also means asking oneself with truth and sincerity: what have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What must I do for Christ? (cf. *EE*, 53).

3. And I come to the last point. In the Gospel Jesus tells us: "whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it.... For whoever is ashamed of me..." (Lk 9:23; 26). And so forth. The shame of the Jesuit. Jesus' invitation is to never be ashamed of him but to follow him always with total dedication, trusting in him and entrusting oneself to him. But as St Ignatius teaches us in the "First Week", looking at Jesus and, especially, looking at the Crucified Christ, we feel that most human and most noble sentiment which is shame at not being able to measure up to him; we look at Christ's wisdom and our ignorance, at his omnipotence and our impotence, at his justice and our wickedness, at his goodness and our evil will (cf. *EE*, 59). We should ask for the grace to be ashamed; shame that comes from the continuous conversation of mercy with him; shame that makes us blush before Jesus Christ; shame that attunes us to the heart of Christ who made himself sin for me; shame that harmonizes each heart through tears and accompanies us in the daily "sequela" of "my Lord". And this always brings us, as individuals and as the Society, to humility, to living this great virtue. Humility which every day makes us aware that it is not we who build the Kingdom of God but always the Lord's grace which acts within us; a

humility that spurs us to put our whole self not into serving ourselves or our own ideas, but into the service of Christ and of the Church, as clay vessels, fragile, inadequate and insufficient, yet which contain an immense treasure that we bear and communicate (cf. 2 Cor 4:7).

I have always liked to dwell on the twilight of a Jesuit, when a Jesuit is nearing the end of life, on when he is setting. And two images of this Jesuit twilight always spring to mind: a classical image, that of St Francis Xavier looking at China. Art has so often depicted this passing, Xavier's end. So has literature, in that beautiful piece by Pemán. At the end, without anything but before the Lord; thinking of this does me good. The other sunset, the other image that comes to mind as an example is that of Fr Arrupe in his last conversation in the refugee camp, when he said to us — something he used to say — “I say this as if it were my swan song: pray”. Prayer, union with Jesus. Having said these words he took the plane to Rome and upon arrival suffered a stroke that led to the sunset — so long and so exemplary — of his life. Two sunsets, two images, both of which it will do us all good to look at and to return to. And we should ask for the grace that our own passing will resemble theirs.

Dear brothers, let us turn to Our Lady who carried Christ in her womb and accompanied the Church as she took her first steps. May she help us always to put Christ and his Church at the centre of our life and our ministry. May she, who was her Son's first and most perfect disciple, help us let Christ make us his own, in order to follow him and serve him in every situation; may she who responded with the deepest humility to the Angel's announcement: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38), enable us to feel ashamed at our own inadequacy before the treasure entrusted to us. May it also enable us to feel humility as we stand before God; and may we be accompanied on our way by the fatherly intercession of St Ignatius and of all the Jesuit Saints who continue to teach us to do all things, with humility, *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*, for the greater glory of our Lord God.